

PLANET



STORIES

Vol. 1

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SPACE-LINER X87

By RAY CUMMINGS

I AM sure that none of you have had the real details of the tragic voyage of last year, which was officially designated as Earth-Moon Flight 9. The diplomacy of Interplanetary relations is ticklish at best. Earth diplomats especially seem afraid of their own shadows if there is any chance of annoying the governments of Venus or Mars, so that by Earth censorship most of the details of that ill-fated voyage of the X-87 were either distorted, or wholly suppressed. But the revolution at Grebhar is over now. If those Venus Revolutionists—helped perhaps by Mar-

tian money and supplies—had been successful, they would have been patriots. They lost, so they are traitors, and I can say what I like.

My name is Fred Penelle. I'm a Shadow Squad man, working in Great-New York and vicinity. Ordinarily I deal with the tracking of comparatively petty criminals. Being plunged into this affair of Interplanetary piracy which threatened to involve three worlds, Heaven knows was startling to me. I had never before even been on any flight into the starways. But I did my best.





The X-87 was a red shambles. It roared the starways, a renegade Venusian at the controls, a swaggering Martian plotting the space-course. And in an alumite cage, deep below-decks, lay Penelle, crack Shadow Squadman—holding the fate of three worlds in his manacled hands

My part in the thing began that August evening when an audiphoned call came to my home. It was my superior, Peter Jamison, summoning me to City Night-Desk 6.

"I've a job for you," he said. "Get here in a hurry, Fred." The audiphone grid showed his televised face; I had never seen it so grim.

I live at the outskirts of Great-New York, in northern Westchester. I caught an overhead monorail; then one of the high-speed, sixth level rolling sidewalks and in half an hour was at the S.S. Building in mid-Manhattan. We S.S. men

work in pairs. My partner, as it happened, was ill.

"You'll have to go in on this alone," Jamison told me. "And you haven't much time, Fred. The X-87 sails at Trinight."

"X-87?" I murmured. "What's that got to do with me?"

Jamison's fat little figure was slumped at his desk, almost hidden by the banks of instruments before him. Then he sat up abruptly, pushed a lever and the insulating screens slid along the doors and windows to protect us from any possible electric eavesdropping.

"I can't tell you much," he said with

lowered voice. "This comes from the Department of Interplanetary Affairs. The X-87 launches at Trinight tonight, for the Moon. They want me to have a man on it. An observer." Jamison's face went even grimmer, and he lowered his voice still further. "Just what they know, or suspect, they didn't tell even me. But there's something queer going on—something we ought to know about. Quite evidently there's some plot brewing against the Blake Irite Corporation. They even hinted that it concerned perhaps both Venus and Mars—"

YOU all know the general history of the Moon, of course; but still it will do no harm to sketch it here. It was scarcely twenty years ago when Georg Blake established the first permanent Moon Colony, erecting the first practical glassite air-domes under which one might live and work on the airless, barren surface of our satellite. Two years later, it was the same Georg Blake who discovered the rich irite deposits on the towering slopes of Mt. Archimedes. The Blake Irite Corporation employs twenty thousand workers now.

"Mars and Venus have no irite," Jamison was saying. "They import it from us, for their inferior imitations of our gravity plates. And, combined with the T-catalyst, it runs our modern atomic engines and charges our newest long-range atomic guns. The Governments of Mars and Venus are building imitations of those engines. You know about that, Fred?"

I nodded. I had heard quite a bit, of course, about the mysterious T-catalyst. It is made only here on Earth—a guarded secret of the Anglo-American Federation, developed by our Government chemists in Great-London. Our War Department uses it for guns, of course. But its use is forbidden elsewhere, save for commercial purposes. Venus and Mars have been under strict guarantee, regarding its use. We have supplied them from time to time with limited quantities, for commercial purposes only.

"Do not misunderstand me. I have no possible desire to anger the present legal Governments of the Martian Union, nor the Venus Free State, and thus project myself—just one unimportant Earth-citi-

zen—into a storm of Interplanetary complications. I am not even hinting that Mars or Venus have ever broken, or ever would break, their guarantees by using the T-catalyst for weapons of war. But in Grebhar, a very sizable revolution against the Venus Free State had broken out. That is something very different. A bandit Government. Bandit army—under guarantees to no one."

"What's all this got to do with me, and the X-87?" I suggested.

Jamison flung a swift look around his shadowed, dimly tube-lit office, as though he feared that someone might be lurking here. "The Blake Irite Corporation, on the Moon, needs the T-catalyst for a thousand things," he said slowly. "The engines of their air-renewers throughout that huge network of domes. The engines of their mining equipment—"

"You mean it's being stolen from them?"

Jamison shrugged. "Maybe." He paused, and then he drew me toward him. "Anyway, the X-87, on this Voyage 9 tonight, is taking the largest supply of T-catalyst to the Moon which has ever been transported." Jamison smiled wryly. "You and I, Fred, are among the very few people who know of it. The X-87 is not being unduly guarded. That in itself would look suspicious. Every possible precaution has been taken to keep the thing a secret. But there have been queer things happen. Perhaps only coincidences—"

"Such as what?"

"Well, Georg Blake died, quite mysteriously, a few days ago—"

"Murdered?"

Again Jamison shrugged. "The whole thing was censored. I don't know any more about it than you do. He has a son and daughter—young Blake, still under twenty—and Nina, his young daughter, who is only sixteen. The management of the entire Moon industry devolves now upon them."

I could envisage Interplanetary spies on the Moon—and with the forceful Georg Blake now out of the way, a raid upon that supply of the T-catalyst—

"Little Nina is going back to the Moon this voyage to take control of the company," Jamison was adding. "Her father died—was murdered if you like—here in

Great-New York. And to make it still more mysterious, young Blake—the girl's brother—seems to have vanished. There is only Nina—"

Queer indeed. And even worse, Jamison now told me that several members of the X-87's crew were ill, and one or two had recently died, so that she was starting on her flight tonight with at least five new men. . . .

THE little space-ship was to sail at 3 a. m. I had my luggage aboard an hour ahead; and at quarter of three I was loitering on the tube-lit stage watching the passengers bidding good-bye to their friends and then going up the long incline to where the X-87 was cradled forty feet overhead. An S.S. Man, without too much equipment, can hide it all pretty comfortably. Most of my small apparatus was tucked into capacious pockets. And with my square-cut jacket buttoned over my weapon belt, I imagine I looked like any ordinary citizen. I was booked as a mathematics clerk, going to the Moon to take a position in the bookkeeping department of the Blake Company. I'm smallish, and dark—and not too handsome, my friends tell me. Just an unobtrusive fellow whom nobody would particularly notice. I certainly hoped now that that would prove to be so.

"How many passengers this voyage?" I asked young Len Smith, who was standing here on the landing shed beside me. He was a slim, handsome fellow, the X-87's radio-helio operator, ornate and exceedingly dapper in his stiff white-and-gold uniform.

"Damned if I know. Fifteen or twenty maybe. Usually are about that many."

A big seven-foot Martian stopped near us, directing the attendants who were carrying his luggage. "Who's that?" I murmured to Len Smith.

Dr. Frye, the X-87's surgeon—a weakened little fellow with a grim, saturnine face and scraggly iron-gray hair—had joined us. He answered me.

"Set Mokka, he calls himself."

"Going to the Moon, for what?" I persisted.

Dr. Frye shrugged. "Passengers aren't required to give their family history. Set Mokka is a wealthy man in Ferrok-Shahn,

I understand. An enthusiastic Interplanetary traveler—"

Len, the young helio operator, diverted my attention. "Have a look," he murmured. "There comes Nina Blake. If she isn't a little beauty I'm a sub-cellar track-sweeper."

Now I'm not much for girls, but I don't mind stating thus publicly that Nina Blake struck me then as the most strikingly beautiful girl of any world whom I had ever seen.

As she came past, I saw that four stalwart attendants of the X-87 were carrying a long oblong box; one of her pieces of luggage. Quite obviously she was particularly concerned over it; she followed it closely, and signaled the men to precede her with it up the incline.

I got away from Len Smith and Dr. Freye and was up the incline close after Nina Blake. I saw the squat, square-rigged figure of Capt. Mackensie come forward to greet the girl, his most distinguished passenger. Instantly she spoke to the men carrying the oblong box, and they set it on end beside her on the desk; and at her gesture, they moved away.

NBODY noticed me as I got up to that box and stood in its shadow. I had no particular motive, save perhaps my instinct as an S.S. Man to probe anything that puzzles me. And suddenly I heard Nina say softly:

"No. I'm not—too frightened, Captain. I'll be quite all right."

That stiffened me. But a far greater shock came almost instantly afterward. The girl was whispering now to Mackensie, their voices too low for me to hear. She was leaning partly against the upright box, and I saw her slim white hand furtively roving it, one of her fingers pressing what might have been a hidden lever. The sleek, polished side of the box was close to my head—and abruptly, from within it, I seemed to hear a faint muffled, ticking sound! A mechanism in the huge box which the girl's furtive hand had started! It was a slow, rhythmic tick, and a faint swishing.

"Oh, you, Penelle. Come here—I want you to meet Miss Blake."

Captain Mackensie had noticed me, and his gesture brought me to join them. For

a moment we stood in a group as I was introduced. Nina's hand had darted to the box again, perhaps to stop the ticking.

"Your first flight, Penelle?" Mackenzie was saying. His voice was booming, hearty, loud enough to carry to any of the passengers and crew who were near us here on the dim side-deck. Jamison had told me that of everyone on the X-87, only Captain Mackenzie would be aware of my true identity and purpose. I caught his significant glance now as he shot it at me from under his heavy gray-black brows. And then abruptly he stepped nearer to me.

"Never talk secretly to me," he murmured. "No insulation here. You take care of Miss Blake. Say nothing—keep your eyes wide. When we get to the Moon—"

I stiffened, went cold, with my heart suddenly pounding. My hand darted out, gripped the captain's arm. "Wait!" I murmured.

On my chest, underneath my shirt, a flat, round little detector-grid was abruptly glowing warm against my flesh. An interference current was overcharging its low-pressure wires so that they were heating and burning me. An eavesdropping current! No one save a Government criminal-tracker may legally use an eavesdropping ray. But there was one here, listening to us now!

I murmured it to Mackenzie; turned and darted away. A dim door oval was nearby. I went through it, into a narrow, tube-lit corridor of the ship's superstructure. Momentarily no one was here; there was just the dim, vaulted little arcade, gleaming pallidly silver from its fittings and trim of alumite with rows of cabin doorways on each side. The name-plates glowed with the names of the occupants for this voyage. All the doors were closed; a few faint voices from passengers in the cabins were vaguely audible.

AT a cross-corridor I stopped. Was someone here able to watch me? From my shirt I drew out the little detector-grid. It was cooling now, but still its direction needle was swaying. The source of the current seemed ahead of me in this cross corridor. How far, I could not say—the distance gauge-point was swiftly dropping to zero. The eavesdrop-

ping current had been snapped off. Wherever he was, this listener knew now that we were aware of him.

On my padded, felt-soled shoes I dashed ahead to where the corridor widened into a tiny smoking lounge.

"Oh, you Penelle? What's the matter? Can't you find your cubby?"

It was Dr. Frye, the ship's surgeon. Fortunately, he did not see the Banning heat-flash gun in my hand. He was sprawled here in a chair, smoking. His thin face grinned up at me. "Ask the purser your location," he added. His gesture waved me toward the purser's tiny office-cubby down the opposite corridor.

"Thanks," I agreed.

The purser's cubby was unoccupied. I passed it, came to the stern end where the superstructure stopped and the side decks converged into a triangle of open deck under the dome at the pointed stern. There were a few passengers lounging around and deckhands moving at their tasks of uncradling the vessel which now was ready to take off. Over at a glassite bull's-eye window in the side pressure-wall, the big Martian, Set Mokka, was standing, gazing at the people on the lower stage.

And suddenly, from the shadow of a cargo-shifter near at hand, a blob of figure detached itself and moved away. In a moment the deck-light gleamed on it; a member of the crew—squat, bent, misshapen gargoyle shape; a hideous Earthman hunchback, with dangling gorilla-like arms that swayed as he walked. Then I saw his face; ghastly countenance, lumped with disease, a mouth that seemed to leer and eyes with puckered rims—eyes that seemed to glare at me with impish malevolence as he shambled past me and vanished around the other side deck.

In a few minutes more, with a blast of sirens, the little X-87 trembled, lifted nose first from its cradle and was away, slanting up into the night. The lights of the giant city dropped beneath us. I stood at one of the side bull's-eyes watching them as they dwindled into a blob, merged with other lights of other cities along the coast.

I had been up into the stratosphere many times, of course, but this was to be my first flight into Interplanetary Space. I could envisage our gleaming silver vessel now, tiny little cylinder with pointed ends, alu-

mite keel-bottom and the great rounded glassite dome on top, as we slid so swiftly up out of the atmosphere. A little world now to ourselves.

The little vessel pounded and quivered with the vibrations of its disintegrating atomic rocket-streams at the stern. Then as we slid into the upper reaches of the stratosphere, the rocket engines were silenced; the gravity-plates were de-insulated, set with Earth-repulsion as we swung toward the gleaming half-moon ahead and over our bow.

The ship was vibrationless now. All movement seemed detached from us. Alone in Space we seemed hovering, poised.

The voyage of doom had begun.

"APPARENTLY you have not suffered from the miserable pressure sickness," Ollog Torio said. "Or have you, Set Mokka?"

"I have not. We Martians are made of sterner stuff. Is that not so, Dr. Frye?"

"Well," the saturnine little surgeon said, "well, for you, yes, Set Mokka. But Martians are humans, like anybody else. I have seen them in distress, upon occasion, when the pressure changes too fast, coming out of the atmosphere."

Four of us were sitting on the triangle of the X-87's bow deck—the towering, swaggering Martian Set Mokka, slumped in his chair, wrapped in his great cloak with his hairy brown legs like huge pillars of strength crossed beneath it, revealed by its flair; the weazened, morose-looking Dr. Frye, and Ollog Torio. I had just met this Venusian. Like most of them from our sister planet, Torio was slender, graceful, with the characteristic finely chiseled features, grayish skin and heavy black brows. He seemed a man of perhaps forty. Romantic in dress and bearing. His hair was sleek and black, with gray streaks in it. His pointed face, accentuated by a pointed, waxed beard, was pallid. His robe was white and purple, with a white ruff at his slender throat. He was, I understood, a wealthy man, a retired capitalist from Grebhar.

It was now, by the established ship-time, what might be termed mid-evening. The passengers had had two meals, and a normal time of sleep. They were dispersed about the little vessel, gathered in groups,

gazing with a natural awe through the side bull's-eyes at the wonders of the great dome of the Heavens, spread now around us.

My first trip into Space. It would be out of place here for me to describe that queer, awed, detached feeling everyone gets; especially at his first view of the vast blackness of Interstellar Space with its blazing white stars. Behind us, the Earth hung, a great dull red ball, blurred and mottled with cloud-banks. The stern deck triangle gleamed dull-red. But up here in the bow the Moon hung round and white. We were still in the cone of the Earth's shadow. The moonlight here drenched the deck like liquid silver.

In romance, moonlight shimmers and sparkles to inspire a lover's smile. But the reality of the Moon is cold, bleak and desolate. Even without a telescope now, I could see the etched heights of the great lunar mountains. Archimedes, Copernicus and Kepler lay in full sunlight. The heights glared; the depths of the barren, empty seas were black pools of inky shadow. The great Mare Imbrium was solid, mysterious darkness.

I had been awed by the wonders of Space. But the feeling was past now, engulfed by the sense of disaster which more than ever was upon me. The Earthlight on our rear deck seemed to symbolize it. Red—as though already that deck were bathed in blood. I found myself shuddering. Somewhere on board—I had no idea where—a treasure of the precious T-catalyst was hidden. Had that fact leaked out? Why was the beautiful little Nina Blake so flooded with secret terror? What was the huge coffin-like trunk, which sounded like a time-bomb? The box, I knew, had been placed in her sleeping cubby. . . . And back in the S.S. Building my superior, Jamison, had said something which damnably now hung in my memory: "You keep your eyes and ears open, Fred. Things are not likely to be what they seem, on that voyage."

Accursed ineptitude of Earth's Interplanetary Relations Board, that would let a condition such as this come to pass! I felt wholly alone here, coping with God knows what. "Things are not likely to be what they seem." I found myself tensely suspicious of everything, of everybody. This swaggering Martian, Set Mokka—he

was sitting now, gazing at me as though appraisingly, his lips twitching in a half-smile of sardonic humour. This Ollog Torio—was he what he seemed, just a wealthy traveler? Even little Dr. Frye, the Ship's Surgeon—I could not forget that when I had tried to nab that eavesdropper, it was Dr. Frye, gazing at me from his seat alone in the ship's smoking lounge, whom I had encountered.

"SO you are going to the Moon to work for the Blake Company?" the Venus man was saying. He spoke English with only a trace of the prim, precise Venus accent.

"Yes," I agreed. "Mathematics clerk. It will be a novel experience for me, on the moon—"

"Quite," Set Mokka said out of his reverie. "Quite novel."

Did they really think I was a mathematics clerk? Someone here on board suspected me; that eavesdropper had turned his ray upon me quickly enough when I had stood talking to Captain Mackensie . . .

"You're having bad times in Grebhar," little Dr. Frye said presently to Torio. "How is the revolution going? We hear so little by helio—and most of it censored by your Venus Free State."

The slim Torio shrugged. "The fighting was in the mountains only, when I was there. I think those rebels will not make out too well."

"Rebels," I said. "If they lose, they will be traitors, worthy of death. But if they win, I expect you'll call them patriots?"

That made the hulking Martian laugh. "Human behavior is practical, never idealistic. The original right or wrong will be forgotten. It is only results that count."

"I pay little attention to it," Torio said blandly. "Venus should be for love, for romance. I have no stomach for killing."

"Speaking of romance," Dr. Frye interjected. "Here comes our Earth version of it."

We were all on our feet as the small, black and white clad, trousered figure of Nina Blake emerged from the end corridor of the superstructure. She hesitated; then took a seat among us. Her cloak was off; the moonlight and starlight bathed her with

its silver. Was the terror still upon her? I could not at first tell. She was quiet, composed. We men were all smoking little white arrant cylinders. She told us smilingly to continue. But as she stretched herself in the cushioned chair, between me and Torio, it seemed that the flash of her gaze upon me carried relief—as though in me she had her only protector here on the ship.

"The little Earth-lady is very gracious," Torio commented with Venus smoothness as he lighted one of the cylinders. "I have always maintained that in the lush forests of Venus are the only really beautiful women in the Universe. I shall have to revise that now, Miss Blake."

She flushed a little under the boldness of his gaze. And he laughed. "That makes you even more beautiful. 'Flinging back a million starglints, the depths of Space remind me of Thine eyes,'" he quoted.

I am only an S.S. Man. Far be it from me now, so publicly to write what might cause Miss Nina Blake any offense. I try to state only what happened. There is no one, I feel sure, who could sit beside her and not be stirred by her beauty in that drenching moonlight. But to Torio, pretty speeches came with a laugh. Instinctive. It annoyed me. I might as well admit it.

For a time our little group chatted. Then, one by one, the men wandered away. Was it that one of them wanted to observe Nina and me alone? I could not help the thought as I leaned toward her.

"Easy now. Quiet!" And then I said aloud, "That Venus man makes very pretty speeches, Miss Blake. To us of Earth, they do not come so naturally."

Her startled gaze at my warning relaxed into a laugh—a laugh like silver glints of moonlight on a mountain stream.

"No woman can pretend that she dislikes them."

"No. I suppose not." I guess I was really pretty earnest; unsmiling; breathless. I was making conversation with the feeling that someone was watching us trying to lip-read perhaps, not daring to use a ray. But my talk was more than acting; I really meant it.

"A Venus man needn't think he has a monopoly on pretty speeches," I added.

"Inspired by the moonlight?"

"And you," I replied, smiling at her. Adorable little dimples showed in her cheeks as she grinned at me. "Thank you, sir." Then she leaned closer. "You tell the Captain—Torio and Mekk—in the corridor a while ago—"

"Easy! Cover your mouth. You heard them?"

"Yes. Whispering. Eight men—five in the crew—"

"I'm only a mathematics clerk," I said. "But beauty like yours, Miss Blake—it makes me wish I were King. King of the Universe."

"That would be very nice," she laughed.

"Yes. Wouldn't it? 'If I were King, ah love, if I were King, the stars would be your pearls upon a string; the world a ruby for your finger ring; and you could have the sun and moon to wear—if I were King.'"

And I meant it. Surely no man ever made love under such a handicap as this! I bent closer over her, with the perfume of her intoxicating me; and she whispered,

"You tell him I'm afraid—tonight—at the next time of sleep—"

SHE suddenly checked herself, with a sharp sucking intake of her breath as she stared down the deck. My gaze followed hers. From the gloom beside the superstructure some twenty feet from us, a shadow had detached itself—misshapen shadow; that hunchback, malevolent looking member of the crew. He went shambling past us, with a coil of rope from a cargo shifter in his hand.

Did his sudden appearance strike terror into Nina? She was holding herself tense; not speaking, nor glancing at me, but staring seemingly fascinated by the man's gargoyle aspect. He perhaps did not notice us, and yet I had the feeling that his little eyes under the lumpy forehead had flung us a peering glance.

When he had gone past and vanished, back toward the stern on the other side deck, it seemed to me that the girl was shuddering.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"N-nothing."

"You're afraid of that fellow, Nina?"

"No! Oh no!" Her unnecessary vehemence seemed to belie her words.

The thing had so startled me that I had

relaxed my caution. I realized it, as abruptly, from the ladder-steps which led up to the control turret on the roof of the superstructure almost over us, a long, lanky, white-uniformed figure was disclosed coming down. It was the ship's First Officer, young William Wilson. He was a handsome young giant. He smiled at us—mostly at Nina, and lounged into the chair beside her.

I had no further chance to be with the girl alone. A light meal was served us by one of the stewards, there on deck. The radio-helio operator, young Len Smith, had joined us. The squat, heavy-faced James Polter, ship's Purser, added himself to us; and then the fat, jolly, moon-faced little Peter Green, Second Officer, came puffing down from the chart room behind the control turret and drew up a chair. It was as though the girl were a magnet.

I left them presently. From back along the side-deck where I stood apparently gazing through a bull's-eye at the vast wonders of the glittering Heavens in which the little X-87 was hanging, I could see the group of men around Nina on the fore-deck, a gay little party in the moonlight. Why was Nina so terrified of that ugly hunchback? I had inquired about him casually from young Len Smith. His name was Durk; a new member of the crew, engaged to replace one of those so mysteriously sick. This was his first voyage. . . . Five of the crew, Nina had said. I was to tell the Captain about it. Vehemently now I wanted a talk with Mackensie. We'd have to chance an eavesdropper; if I was alert, my detector should warn me; and the promptness with which we had discovered the eavesdropping ray before, I figured would warn the fellow not to use it again.

It would have been, by Earth-routine, perhaps eleven p. m. The passengers were retiring to their sleeping cubbies. The decks now were almost deserted. I went up one of the side ladders to the superstructure roof. It glittered with starlight that came down through the glassite pressure dome which arched close overhead here. The superstructure roof was a rectangular deck space, a hundred feet long perhaps, by thirty wide. A low railing surrounded it at which one might look down upon the lower side decks. Chairs

were scattered about up here, all of them unoccupied. Amidships was the little kiosk which housed the radio-helio equipment, with young Smith's sleeping cubby adjacent to it. The place was closed and locked now. Aft of it there was open deck space to where the roof-deck ended, with the stern deck-triangle a level below, where the earthlight still was red like blood.

I turned forward. The chart room backed against the control turret. The chart room was dark. In the control turret I could see Capt. Mackensie at the controls, his squat, square figure etched by moonlight. Would this be a good time to try and talk with him?

I started forward. The party down on the forward deck was just dispersing; I saw the boyish figure of Nina, starting for the superstructure corridor, with the giant handsome William Wilson escorting her. And then Dr. Frye came up the front ladder, went into the control turret and joined Mackensie. I turned aft; it was no time to see Mackensie now.

SUDDENLY I stopped, melted down into a black shadow near the helio kiosk and flattened myself on the deck. An S.S. Man, so they say, develops a sixth sense. Maybe so. Certainly I didn't see anything, nor hear anything. But I was aware that someone, or something, was up here on the silent deck with me. Perhaps it was a sense of smell; my nostrils dilated with the impression that the faint drift of artificial air up here had somehow changed its quality. Was there something artificially invisible stalking here? The Groff magnetic cloaks, so recently perfected, are closely held by Governmental orders. Even we S.S. Men seldom use them. But it is a queer thing—no matter what devices you use in crime-tracking, you may be pretty sure the criminal has them to use against you.

I tried my infra-red glasses. They disclosed nothing save the glowing heat of the ventilators where the warm air was coming up. The nearest I had to an eavesdropper was a pair of low-scale phones. In a second or two I adjusted them; tuned them. The myriad blended tiny sounds of the ship's interior gave me nothing that I could identify. And then it seemed that there was a very faint hissing—something,

quite near me, which should not have been here.

Banning heat-gun in hand, I prowled around to the other side of the helio kiosk. How that lurking intruder got away, I don't know. To this day I have no idea. Doubtless he heard or saw me, and slid along the line of deck-shadows in a magnetic cloak, getting away so swiftly that my infra-red glasses could not pick up the heat of his body or his mechanism.

At all events he was gone. There was nothing but a faint chemical smell. And then, on the metal of the helio-room door, I saw a burned spot near the lock where his heat-torch just for a second had started its hissing; and then he had become aware of me and had taken flight. Someone trying to break into Smith's helio room!

That would have taken me to Captain Mackenzie whether Dr. Frye was there or not. But abruptly, again I went tense, so suddenly startled that the blood seemed to chill in my veins. The low-scale magnifiers were still in my ears, murmuring with a chaos of tiny, meaningless sounds. My metal heel-tip by chance must have struck a metal cross-beam of the deck. Abruptly I heard a voice, which at that second must have been raised louder than it had been an instant before.

"Oh please! Oh my God, no!"

A girl's voice, gasping that fragment in an anguish of terror. Nina's voice!

I FRANTICALLY tuned the magnifiers, to clarify it; but I lost it and could not get it back. Nina's voice, seemingly from her sleeping-cubby, which I knew was just about under me in the superstructure. I went down the side companion ladder with a rush; ducked into a nearby cross corridor. It was dim, silent and empty. The nameplates glowed on the doors. I came to hers, with its glowing greenish letters, *Nina Blake*.

Without the earphones there was only silence here now. For a second I stood, gun in hand, undecided. The door probably was locked; I did not dare try it to see. With my heat-torch, or even with a flash of the Banning gun, I could melt away the flimsy lock in a few seconds. But would that be quick enough? If one of the villains were in there with her now, and I blasted the door and startled him,

his first move might be to kill her. . . .

Tick-tick . . . tick-tick. . .

With naked ears I suddenly realized that I was hearing the ticking from the big coffin-shaped box in her room . . . Tick-tick . . . tick-tick. . . Rhythmic . . . gruesome. . . . I own that my fingers were trembling as I crouched there by the door and adjusted my headphone. . . . The ticking rose to hammering thuds. Or was it my own pounding heart? . . . The hammering seemed to drown a tiny whisper of voices. Someone was in there with her, unquestionably.

I have no apologies for what an S.S. Man must do under stress. High over the top of the door there was a small transom-like opening, covered by a metal grille-work. I could see faint tubelight glowing up there from within her room. I backed across the corridor, adjusting with hurried fingers my miniature projector of the Benson curve-ray. In another second its faint violet stream leaped from my hand in a crescent up to the grille. Curved light-rays, an arc through the grille and down into her room, bringing me along its curved path a faint distorted vista of the scene inside.

And then I heard her low voice quivering with terror:

"No! No, Jim—don't—"

James Polter, the Purser? In that confused second I stared along the Benson curve-light. Just an edge of the coffin-shaped box, which was lying flat on the floor against one wall, was visible to me. In the center of the dim room, Nina was standing—beautiful, slim little figure in a pale-rose, filmy negligee, with her dark hair streaming down over her pink-white shoulders. Her back was to me as she gazed at the deck window. It was a dark oval, with the shadows of the side-deck outside.

And in that second the blob of a man was visible in the window. I could only glimpse the hunched outline of him as he scrambled through, dropped to the deck and fled.

THERE was a cross corridor here which led directly to the forward end of that starboard side deck. I dashed its length; reached the deck. It was empty. That was my first confused impression;

then as I whirled aft, I saw a blob on it, near the other end of the superstructure. A blob which rhythmically moved, sidewise and back again. And in the silence, there was the squish of water.

It was the hunchback deckhand. He was swabbing the deck, with a mop and a pail of water. I slowed my pace as I approached him, and dropped the Banning gun into my pocket. Could he by any wild chance, have been the figure I saw climb out of Nina's window? It seemed impossible.

"Evening, Durk," I said. I stopped beside him. His lumpy, disease-ridden face came up as he shot me a glance.

"Even-sir," he muttered.

His bulbous lips were parted, as though perhaps with a panting breath. The idea turned me cold. What ghastly hold could this fellow have upon Nina? I can't pretend to describe my emotions at that moment. Nina wasn't screaming now to tell that a man had forced himself into her room. She was willing to keep it secret. Or perhaps too terrorized to do anything else.

"What's your name?" I said pleasantly. I had stopped beside him; was lighting an arrant cylinder.

"You said my name, sir. It's Durk." His muttered voice was thick. The sort of voice one might use to disguise its natural tone? Was it that?

"Oh, yes. Durk," I agreed. "Jim Durk? You're a new man, aren't you?"

"First voyage, yes sir. But my name's Pete Durk."

Surely he was breathing too hard for a man scrubbing a deck—much more like a man who had been running.

"My first voyage too," I said. I started on; then turned back. "By the way, have you seen Mr. Polter? I was looking for him."

"The Purser, sir? I'm thinkin' he should be in his office."

I nodded; turned the superstructure corner; went into the main corridor. Polter's little office cubby had a light in it. He was sitting there casting up his accounts. Jim Polter. I had heard half a dozen people call him that. . . . Nina's voice came echoing back into my mind. . . . "No—no Jim, don't—"

Was this the fellow who had climbed out of her window just a few moments

ago? His desk light illumined his squat, thick-set figure. He was a man of perhaps forty. He glanced up at my step.

"Hello, Mr. Penelle. You're up late."

"Just going in," I said.

Polter was smoking. The fragile ash on the little white paper cylinder was nearly an inch long.

I passed on. At Nina's door I briefly paused. There was no sound. The ventilator grille overhead was dark now. Upon impulse I pressed her buzzer.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"It's I. Fred Penelle."

Her door opened an inch; the sheen of light in the corridor showed her white face framed by the flowing black hair. A wave of her perfume came out to me.

"What—what is it?" she murmured.

"Are you all right?" I whispered lamely.

"Yes. Yes—of course." And she added still more softly, "You're taking too much chance—here like this. The Captain—did you tell the Captain—what I told you—"

"I'm going there now."

She closed the door. I stood with the sudden realization that I might be going beyond my job as an S.S. Man; my personal interest in this girl leading me to pry into her private affairs. But the feeling was brief. The terror was still in her eyes; I could not miss it. I decided then to go to Mackensie in the control turret. Someone had tried to melt into the helio room. Mackensie must be told it. Heaven knows, there never had been an S.S. Man who felt as helpless as I did at that moment. I could not determine whether I should tell the Captain what I had seen and heard in Nina's room, or not. How much Mackensie himself knew of what might be going on, I could not guess. And there was not another person on the X-87 whom I could trust! It was as though I were wholly alone here, with lurking murderers in every shadow, watching their chance—waiting—perhaps for a predetermined time when they would come into the open and strike.

I WAS part way along the corridor when without warning my body rose in the air. Like a balloon I went to the low vaulted ceiling, struck it gently, rebounded, and floated diagonally back to the floor, where I landed in a heap! Heaven knows,

it was startling. For those seconds I had been weightless, the impulse of my last step wafting me up, and my thud against the ceiling knocking me back again. The weird loss of weight was gone at once; I was close to the floor when I felt myself drop down to it. And I scrambled to my feet. My heart was thumping; I knew what had happened. In the base of the ship, artificial gravity controls gave us Earth's normal gravity on board. Without them, the slight mass of the X-87 would give a gravity pull so negligible that everything in its interior would be almost without weight. Len Smith, the young helio operator, had taken me around the little vessel just before the voyage began, explaining me its mechanisms. I remembered the room of magnetic controls, where the X-87's artificial gravity was regulated. A young technician named Bentley had been there. I had spoken to him a moment. He and his partner alternated on duty there throughout all the voyage.

And the artificial gravity controls now were being tampered with! For just a second or two, this particular area of the corridor here had been cut off, so that as I came to the de-magnetized area my step had tossed me to the ceiling. The floor section was normal now; I stepped out on it gingerly to test it.

Why was Bentley experimenting with his controls? Surely that never went wrong by accident. If I could catch Bentley at it—force him to explain—Or was it someone else tampering with the complex gravitational mechanisms down there? . . .

I remembered the location of the little magnetic control room; rushed to the nearest descending ladder. The lower level, down in the hull, was a metal catwalk, with side aisles leading into suspended tiny rooms. Freight storage compartments bow and stern; air renewal systems; pressure mechanisms; heating and ventilating systems. Beneath me, at the bottom of the hull, were the rooms of gravity plate-shifting mechanisms—compressed air shifters of the huge hull gravity plates by which the course of the ship through Space was controlled. I was not concerned with them—merely with the magnetic artificial gravity of the vessel's interior. The little magnet room was near

at hand; its door was open, with its blue tubelight streaming out.

No one was in sight to see me, apparently, as I padded swiftly along the catwalk. From the distant bow and stern mess-rooms I could hear the faint blended murmuring voices of some of the crew who were off duty. I came to the magnetic room doorway. The room seemingly was empty. The banks of dials, switches and levers which governed the different areas of the ship were ranged up one wall. They all seemed in normal operation; none of the tiny warning trouble-lights were illumined. Bentley's little table, with his pack of arrant cylinders and a scroll book he had evidently been reading, was here with its empty chair before it.

AND then I saw him! He was lying sprawled, face down, over in a corner, with a monstrous shadow from the table upon him, and just the faint glow of the electronic fluorescent tubes painting his dark worksuit so that I noticed him. He was dead; I turned him over, stooping beside him. His chest was drilled with a pencilray of heat, presumably from a low-caliber Banning gun. . . .

"Don't move, Penelle! I've got you!"

I stiffened at the sound of the low, menacing voice in the dimness behind me.

"Leave that gun where it is. Put your hands up and turn around. By God if you try anything funny, I'll drill you through. I've got you covered."

I was kneeling by the body of Bentley, with my gun on the floor-grid beside me. With hands up, I slowly turned. The tall figure of William Wilson, the ship's First Officer loomed over me with the tubelight gleaming on his white and gold uniform. He was staring down grimly; he held a small heat-gun at his hip, leveled at me.

Out in the open at last. So this was one of the criminals; the fellow who had tried to melt into the helio room? The eaves-dropper? The man who had been in Nina's room? Heaven knows, of all on board, I had least suspected him.

He thought, of course, he had me trapped. But you can't capture an S.S. Man just by holding a gun on him and telling him to put up his hands. Even with my hands up, and the Banning gun on the floor beside me, -I could have

pointed my left shoulder at him, drilled him with a stab of heat from the heat-ray embedded in the padded shoulder of my jacket. My right elbow was pressing my side to fire it, with all my body tensed to try and drop under what might have been his answering shot. But I didn't fire. His next words checked me.

"So you're not just a mathematics clerk—a damned murderer here on board! Get up! We're going up to Mackensie."

I stared as his foot kicked at my gun, and he swiftly stooped and picked it up.

"Come on," he added with a rasp. "Climb to your feet, Penelle. We'll see what the Captain has to say about this—"

"That suits me," I murmured. I said nothing more. Docilly I let him shove me in advance of him, up the ladder, along the dim main corridor, up the companionway from the starlit bow deck triangle to the little catwalk bridge in front of the turret.

FORTUNATELY we encountered no one. At his telescope in the peak of the bow, the forward lookout turned and gazed at us curiously. The dim control turret was empty, eerie with the spots of fluorescent light from its banks of instruments. The controls were locked for the vessel's present course. The door oval to the adjacent chart room was open. Mackenzie was alone in there, plotting the X-87's future course on a chart. He stared blankly as the grim young Wilson shoved me in upon him.

"Caught this damned fellow in the magnet-room, Captain. He's killed Bentley. By God—something queer's in the air this voyage. Bentley murdered—"

Mackensie's first stare of startled amusement as I was shoved captive before him, faded into horror. His heavy, square jaw dropped.

"Bentley murdered? Good Lord—why—what?"

"Somebody was tampering with the ship's gravity," I murmured swiftly. "I felt it go off in a section of the main corridor—went down to the magnet-room. Bentley's there dead—drilled through the chest—"

"Bentley killed? Murder, here on my ship! Why, by the Gods of the starways—" Big Mackensie was momentarily

stupified, his eyes widened, his heavy face mottled an apoplectic red with his rush of anger.

"I caught this fellow Penelle—" young Wilson began.

"Don't be an ass," Mackensie roared. "He's a Government crime-tracker—stationed here on board this voyage—"

My gesture tried to stop him. "Easy Captain. Listeners might be on us—"

The chart room door, here beside us, which opened onto the superstructure roof, was closed. But the small oval window beside it, also facing sternward, was open. I dashed to it. The dim roof deck seemed empty. I noticed a light in Len Smith's helio cubby.

I drew down the metal shade of our window. Whirled back. The astonished young Wilson stared at me in numbed amazement. "They're coming into the open," I murmured. "Look here, Captain, we've got to plan—"

"Why—why, good Lord—I thought we were guarding against a plot on the Moon—"

"Well, we're not. It's here—now—" I told him what Nina had said; five of the crew. The new men, placed here on board. And how many of the officers might be in it—

"Why—why good Lord—" Mackensie was completely stricken. For an instant that floored me. I saw him now as a Captain of the old school—bluff, roaring; the sort of fellow who on a surface vessel would deal grimly and ruthlessly with mutineers. But he was frightened now; frightened and confused.

"Why—why Penelle—you mean to think that here on my ship—"

"Ready to strike—now," I murmured. I told him about the burned place on the helio room door. He could only stare, numbed. And now the murder of Bentley—the first tangible attack our adversaries had made. Who were they? Five of the crew—that would include the hunchback Durk . . . Mokk, the Martian? Ollog Torio, the pallid Venus man? Some of the other passengers maybe? And of the ship's officers, whom could we trust?

"Why—why all of them, by God," Mackenzie murmured, as I voiced it. "I wouldn't have traitors on my staff—"

But this treasure of the T-catalyst—it

might be worth a million decimars to the Venus revolutionists. And money can buy men—even men who have long been in honest service. The Second Officer—fat, jolly little Peter Green—he perhaps could be trusted. James Polter, the Purser? Of him I could not guess. Dr. Fyre, the Surgeon? Even with a plugged, counterfeited thousandth part of a decimar, I wouldn't take my eyes off him.

THE handsome young giant, Wilson, stood gazing at us now in blank horror. He was hardly more than a boy. Quite evidently he knew completely nothing of what was going on.

"But what are we going to do?" Mackensie was stammering. Then he spluttered, "By the God's I won't have this sort of thing on my ship. I'll muster them all up here—find out who this damned murderer is—"

I seized him. "Easy Captain." Then I bent closer to him. "Captain Mackensie—things I don't understand yet about this. That big box in Miss Blake's room—" And on impulse I whispered: "Someone was climbing out her window a while ago. She called him Jim. She's in terror of him. Captain, see here, you've got to tell me everything about this."

For an instant, his spluttering ineptitude left him. "I can't," he murmured. "That—that isn't mine to tell. Don't ask it, Penelle." Then he swung back to his own troubles. "What do you think we ought to do? By heaven—I'll turn back to Earth. Turn the whole damn ship's company over to the authorities."

We were now some forty thousand miles from Earth—just about a sixth of the way to the Moon.

"And have them see us swing?" I murmured. "Wouldn't that precipitate whatever it is they're planning to do?"

Three of us here, in the control turret and chart room—and except for Nina, down there alone in her cabin, so far as I really knew, everyone else on the ship might be against us. Swiftly I questioned Mackensie. The X-87 was not equipped with any long-range guns, and very few side arms. What there were, we had now with us here in the chart room. Mackensie gestured to the little arsenal-locker, here in one of the walls beside us.

"Are the crew members allowed to be armed?" I demanded.

"Good Heavens; no!"

"But they will be," young Wilson put in. "Mutineers will be armed—"

There was no argument on that. And each of the officers normally carried one small heat gun. Here in the chart room we had perhaps a half dozen of the heat ray projectors; a few old-fashioned weapons of explosion; powder rifles and automatic revolvers; a small collection of miscellaneous glass bombs—loaded with gas; darkness bombs; a few of the "fainting bombs," as they are popularly called—detonators, with tiny shrapnel impregnated with acetylcholine, which, when introduced into the blood stream by a fragment of shrapnel, instantly lowers the blood pressure so that the victim faints but is not otherwise damaged. And we had two or three small hand projectors of the Benson curve-light, with a device by which we could project the heat ray in a curve as well.

"Well, if I don't turn back, then I'll helio my owners for instructions," Mackensie was saying.

It sounded futile. What could financiers back at their desks in Great-New York have to do with us, embattled out here in Space, barricaded in our little chart room?

"Send a helio for the Interplanetary Patrol," I suggested. "A call for help. If we could contact one of the roving police vessels—"

"Not a one in telescopic sight," Mackensie murmured. "I had a routine report on that a few hours ago."

"Well, we might as well try anyway." Would the pirates be aware of our efforts? Would it bring an attack from them? My only idea was to stall the situation here, whatever it might be. That, and summon help. Then I had another thought: young Len Smith, the helio man—could he be trusted?

"Why—I suppose so," Mackensie stammered. And then he jerked himself out of his terror; his huge hamlike fist banged down on the chart room table, making his calipers and compasses jump. "Damnation, I'll find out quick enough which of my men are loyal. We'll fight this thing through. Penelle, you go tell Smith to get off a distress call. Blast the ether with it—call In-

terplanetary police. Tell Smith to keep at it till he raises one. You stay with him and see, by God, that he does it. You, Wilson, open up that cupboard—get out the weapons. I'll have my damned officers up here."

AS I started for the door I gripped him, whispered: "Captain—where have you got the T-catalyst hidden?"

It startled him. For a second I saw that he was wondering if he could even trust me with the knowledge. Then he gestured. "Over there," he murmured with his lips against my ear. "Little safe hidden in that wall-panel. You press a spring at the left molding. The catalyst is in a small lead cylinder—Gamma-ray insulated."

I nodded.

"Only one other man on board knows that," he whispered. "If anything happens to me—or him—"

Him? Who? I had no time to ask. Mackensie had flung open the door; shoved me out onto the deck. It still seemed deserted; dim with starlight from the glassite dome overhead. Amidships, some forty feet from me, the light in Smith's little helio cubby showed faintly eerie in one of his windows.

I ran there. "Smith. Len Smith . . ." I called it softly. "Len Smith—"

There was only the faint echo of my voice, coming back at me from the steel cubby wall. The door was ajar. I shoved at it, burst in and stood stricken, transfixed, with so great a horror flooding me that the eerie scene in the helio cubby swam before my gaze. At his instrument table the white-uniformed figure of young Smith lay sprawled, a white figure crimsoned ghastly with blood. A knife handle protruded from his back. Horribly his head dangled sidewise, with grisly severed neck.

And as I rushed forward, my movement jostled the body. It slumped, fell from the stool, hitting the floor with a thud. The blow broke the neck vertebrae; the head—ghastly little ball—rolled across the room and stopped at the wall, gruesomely right side up, with Smith's dead eyes staring at me—eyes with the agony of death frozen in them.

Then I saw the wreckage of the instrument table. All our communications

smashed, wrecked beyond repair! For another second I numbly stared. Then, from some distant point of the ship's interior, a strident little electric whistle sounded. A signal! From another section I heard it answered. And then a shot! The barking explosion of a powder-gun . . . the hiss of a stabbing heat-ray . . . a commotion in the lower corridors—shouts of startled passengers . . . a turmoil everywhere. . . .

The attack had begun!

THE turmoil that all in those seconds was spreading about the ship like fire in prairie grass released me from my numbness. I whirled; dashed back through the helio cubby door to the roof deck. It was still unoccupied. Back on the stern deck triangle, where just the stern tip of it showed from here, with the dull-red Earthlight upon it, there was the sizzling flash of a heat-gun. I saw the stern lookout collapse back from his telescope; fall to the deck.

Toward the bow, through the chart-room window where the shade now was up, Wilson was staring out. "Pénelle!"

His voice reached me. Beyond the kiosk of chart room and control turret, a figure appeared coming up the little catwalk ladder from the bow deck. It seemed to be the bow lookout, but whether friend or foe I had no way of guessing.

"Watch yourself, Wilson," I shouted. "Watch the turret—" I was dashing for the side companionway. Whatever transpired up here, there was only one thing in my mind in the chaos of that moment. Nina. . . . She was alone down in her cabin. I must get her up here. . . .

I leaped down the last half of that little side ladder. On the dim side deck ten feet away, two men were fighting, one in white gold uniform, the other a deckhand. They rolled on the deck. A knife flashed. . . . Another man came suddenly from the smoking lounge doorway. He plunged at me, whirling an iron bar. My Banning flash met him head on; I jumped aside as his dead body catapulted to the deck. There was another flash. One of the rolling, fighting men on the deck went limp. The other rose. It was the fat little Peter Green, Second Officer. He was panting; his face streaked with blood.

"Get to your room," he gasped as he saw me. "All passengers stay in your cubbies. Piracy!"

The passengers were shouting now; from a nearby corridor entrance women were screaming. Then from up at the turret, Mackensie turned on the vessel's distress siren. Its shrill, dismal electrical whine sounded above the turmoil.

"Go up to the control turret," I shouted at Green. I dashed into the corridor. Passengers scattered to right and left before me.

"Get into your rooms," I shouted. "Everybody stay in. Barricade—"

An Earth-woman screamed; somebody shouted, "That big Martian—murderer—I saw him killing—" Two little Lunites, mine workers, a young man and a girl, stood with arms around each other in one of the doorways. Pallid little people, confused, helpless, cringing. I shoved them back into their room and banged their door.

Then I turned into the main corridor, ran aft along it, came to the next cross passage. Nina! I saw her, ahead of me in the corridor, close by her smashed door. She was struggling, fighting with the snaky Venus man Ollog Torio; his arms lifted her up as he tried to carry her. I shouted an oath; I did not dare fire. And at the sound of my voice he dropped her, made off through the end door so quickly that I had no time to drill him.

"Nina! Nina!"

I gathered her up, frail little thing in her negligee with her luxuriant black hair streaming down.

"Nina, did he hurt you?"

"No! No, I'm all right."

She was breathless; pallid; her dark eyes were pools of terror. "Oh, dear God!" she gasped. "It's come." She clutched at me. "That hunchback—that fellow Durk—have you seen him?"

"No, I haven't." Her question sent a shudder through me. I set her on her feet. "We've got to get up to the control turret. The captain—his loyal officers up there."

"Oh—Oh, Lord!" With a new anguish of terror upon her face she jerked away from me, ran for her doorway. I saw where Tario had melted through its lock with a heat blast. I dashed through it

after her, and caught her in the center of her room.

"Nina, what's the matter?"

THE oblong coffin cox! It lay flat on the floor, over by the wall of the dim room. In a sudden lull of the ship's chaos the rhythmic ticking was audible. And now there were other sounds from within the box! A thumping! A low, mumbling man's voice!

A rasping voice in the cabin doorway sounded behind me. Gun in hand, I whirled. One of the huge deckhands stood there, murder on his face, a blood-stained knife between his teeth so that he looked like an ancient picture of a surface vessel pirate. He lunged in at us. My flash caught him full in the face; horribly his features blackened as he went down.

"Oh—Oh, I had no chance to let you out!" Nina was half sobbing it as she flung herself down over the box. The ship's alarm siren had suddenly died. Did that mean that the captain and the others in the control turret had been killed? The thought stabbed at me. Distant shots were still sounding. The oaths of fighting men were audible—the loyal members of the crew, fighting those traitors who had so suddenly set upon them. Footsteps were thudding on the roof-deck overhead.

"No chance to let you out!" The pallid girl with trembling fingers was fumbling at the box. Its lid rose up, with the head and shoulders of a man appearing beneath; a man entombed, hiding in there, breathing with the air-renewers of the ticking mechanism. A stalwart man of iron-gray hair. Georg Blake! Nina's father. I recognized him from the many pictures I had seen. He leaped out of the box, stared at me.

"A Government man," Nina gasped. "Here to help us."

The report of Blake's death—his possible murder—all that had been Blake's own doing. He gripped me now; murmured it swiftly. A giant, dominant fellow, he towered over me. Nina was unpacking his weapons from the box as he told me. He had believed there was a plot on the Moon against him; was smuggling himself to the Moon, where in secret, with the villains thinking him dead and only his young

daughter to cope with, he expected to expose them. And most of the voyage he had been hidden in the box, afraid of eavesdroppers or some prying Benson curve-ray.

"Give me those guns, Nina. These damnable murderers—" Then he swung at me; lowered his voice: "Mackensie has the catalyst?"

"Yes," I murmured.

"Good! I know where. By Heaven, they can kill us both and still they won't find it." He was buckling his weapons to his huge belt.

"The captain's in the control turret," I said. "Making a stand up there. We should go to him."

"Yes. You're right. Come on."

We ran. I put my arm around the girl as she sagged like a terrified child against me. Bow and stern, the sounds of the fighting seemed somewhat to have slackened. The passengers still were screaming; I shoved them back in their doorways as we dashed past. And suddenly, reaching the side deck, I realized that the towering Blake was not with us. The deck here was wet with blood. Three or four bodies lay nearby. An Earth-woman lay writhing, her white throat slashed with crimson. There was nothing I could do to help her. My gun ranged the deck; there was nothing to shoot at. Off at the stern, I saw a running man leap high in the air and go down. Then the red Earth-light back there momentarily darkened. Someone had thrown a darkness bomb; its light-absorbing gas came spreading along the deck toward us.

"This way, Nina—climb. I'll follow."

We went up the little ladder. Near the top I held her back, poking my head cautiously up, in advance of her. The dimly starlit deck was blurred with gas and heat fumes. We were mid-forward, perhaps halfway between the helio cubby and the chart room. In a patch here on the deck, darkness gas hung in a layer, a black shroud nearly waist deep. Light still showed in the window of the helio room, where the grewsome body of Len Smith lay sprawled. The chart room was dark, its door closed; but the steel shutter of its window, facing this way, was up a few inches. I thought I saw the muzzle of a gun protruding.

Good enough. Mackensie, Wilson and perhaps others were in there—barricaded, still holding out. I shouted, "I'm Penelle. Don't fire!"

"Come ahead," Mackensie's great voice roared.

LIFE, or death, can hang upon such a little thing. Directly across the thirty-foot roof deck from me the top of the other side-ladder was visible above the layer of darkness. A man's head and shoulders suddenly appeared there. My weapon leveled; but then I saw that it was Nina's father. He saw me at the same instant, waved at me and jumped from the ladder, wading through the waist-high darkness toward the chart room.

I do feel that there was nothing I could have done. Heaven knows I would give anything now if only I had had some flash of intuition.

But I was thinking only of Nina. I turned to gaze down at her, where she stood a step or two below me on the ladder. "Come on, it's all safe."

Safe? I turned back just in time to see a hand and arm come up out of the layer of darkness. Weird, as though detached from its body, it swung; the fingers loosed a little globe. It was only a few feet behind Blake. The globe hurtled at his head, struck it—an explosive bomb. It burst with a sharp report and a little puff of yellow-red light. Perhaps I caught a glimpse of the ghastly scattered fragments of what had been a human head. There was only a grewsome gory neck-stump as the giant body of Blake toppled down into the layer of darkness.

I fired into the darkness gas. The stab of heat dispelled it a little. I hit nothing. Then, as I jumped from the ladder, forgetful of Nina, from the chart-room window Mackensie was wildly firing from two weapons. One of the sizzling heat-rays barely missed me. And then someone behind him, Wilson perhaps, tossed a light-bomb. Its blinding actinic glare momentarily dispelled the gloom. At the other side companion-ladder we caught a vague glimpse of the massive head and shoulders of Mork as he leaped down to the lower deck. His triumphant laugh floated up after him.

"You, Penelle, bring the girl in here,"

Mackensie was roaring. "Hurry now."

I all but carried the half-fainting Nina. The darkness gas was floating away; but I thanked God that enough remained to shroud the fallen headless body of her father as we passed it. The door of the chart room opened; I dashed in with her; hands banged the steel door closed and bolted it.

"I guess we're all here," Mackensie said. The X-87 captain was grim, his thick face puffed with the choleric blood swelling it. His left arm hung almost limp at his side; I saw where his white uniform was burned with the scorching edge of a heat-stab. Young Wilson was here, disheveled, wild-eyed. The little oval to the control turret was open; I could see the fat little Peter Green and James Polter, the purser, in there, crouched at a slit of the forward visor window, weapons in hand. I went in to them.

"Just us," I murmured. "Where's Dr. Frye?"

Polter grimly gestured. "Down there—see him? Damned traitor. I drilled him. See him?"

The X-87 was still on her course. The forward deck triangle was still bathed in moonlight, save that gases blurred it. The forward lookout's telescope lay in a wreck, with his body upon it. Other motionless forms were strewn about; chairs were overturned—those same chairs where Nina and the rest of us had gathered in the moonlight so short a time ago. Dr. Frye's thin body lay huddled down there.

I was aware now that all the fighting had ceased; there was only the distant murmurs of the terrified passengers, in their cabins beneath us. The mutineers everywhere had won; I could not doubt it. The thing was a swift massacre. Those crew members who had tried to be loyal were all dead. I stared, from the tiny hatch-opening in the bow, which led down to the forward messroom, a hand cautiously appeared. There was a stab of flame; a report; an old-fashioned leaden slug thudded harmlessly against a corner of the catwalk bridge, only a few feet from the slit at which we were peering. And in the silence, the sniper's chuckle sounded.

At my elbow, suddenly there was a buzzing. Green turned his head slightly. "Call—coming from the main gravity plate room,"

he murmured. "Answer it, Penelle."

I moved toward the little mouthpiece. But Mackensie had heard it and came running in from the adjacent chart room. "I'll take it. Keep at your lookouts, everybody—this may be a ruse to catch us off guard."

I could hear the tiny voice coming from the receiver as Mackensie clapped it to his ear.

"This is Torio," the voice said suavely.

"Have you had enough, Captain?"

"You go to hell," Mackensie roared.

"That would be very nice, Captain, but it's more likely to be your own destination." I could picture the sleek, ironically smiling Venus man down there at the speaking tube. "We demand your surrender now—if you do not wish to die."

"To hell with you—"

"All you have to do is come out of the turret, with your hands up. You'll be treated—like the passengers. Fair treatment, I do assure you."

"I'll have all you pirates in the detention pen before this is ended," Mackensie roared.

"All we want is your surrender. And to have you tell us where you've hidden that little leaden cylinder."

"By Heaven, you'll never find it. Dead or alive."

"Dead, if you say so," Torio's voice snapped. And then his irony returned. "We'll give you five minutes to decide."

"I want nothing from you. By the gods, I'm still Master here!"

"Empty title, Captain."

"I'm steering us back to Earth," the captain rasped. "The Interplanetary Patrol is coming for us."

That made the Venus man chuckle. "If only it were. But it isn't."

"We'll be back on Earth in eighteen hours," the choleric Mackensie asserted. "You can all go to hell—you murderers—bandits—"

"Back to Earth?" Torio sneered. "Watch us turn, Captain. Not back to Earth. It's Venus we're going to head for. Venus—where the new triumphant Government will be needing that treasure you've hidden. Up there with you in the turret, isn't it?"

"To hell with you—"

"Watch us turn, Captain."

I WAS aware of the glittering Heavens up through the glassite pressure dome as they made a dizzying swoop. The little X-87, with her gravity plates abruptly shifted by the manual controls in the hull room, was turning over.

"See it, Captain?"

"You damned fools," Mackensie roared. "Disconnect my controls if you like. What the hell of it? You can't chart a course down there. You haven't the instruments or the skill."

"Quite true, Captain. That's why we want you to surrender. We'd really rather not kill you. And if we go falling through Space this way, unguided, we might eventually hit something. Your five minutes are almost up. What do you say?"

My nostrils abruptly were dilating. What was this? Suddenly I was aware of a queer acrid smell here. And my head gave a swoop. Here in the turret Green and Polter were at the forward window. I saw them fling me a startled glance. Both of them staggered to their feet. And Mackensie, still gripping the receiver, was swaying.

"What's the matter, Captain?" Torio's suave ironic voice was demanding. "Do you smell it already? You're so silent."

William Wilson, with Nina, was alone on guard in the adjacent chart room. He gave a sudden startled cry. "Come quick! Something's the matter with me."

Poisonous gas here! We realized it abruptly; gas pouring in through the ventilators from below.

"Close those vents!" Mackensie gasped. "Poisoned air—" His hand was clutching at his throat. With his thick neck, full-blooded body, he felt it worse than any of us. His face was purpling; his eyes abruptly bulging. In that second he staggered and fell, ripping the receiver connection out as he went down, where still the ironic voice of Torio was jibing at us.

The rest of us sprang to the grid vents. There was no way of shutting the poisoned air off! The hinges of the multiple little visors were melted away!

"That—that damned Dr. Frye," Polter gasped. "He was up here a while ago. I wondered—"

A scream from Nina, mingled with a sizzling flash in the other room, transfixed us. With all the weird scene swaying be-

fore me, I dashed through the oval. Young Wilson was lying sprawling, dead from a bolt, with his head and shoulders on the window ledge. Nina was crouching in a corner, gasping, staring in terror. I started toward her. My ears were roaring as though with a thousand Niagaras. A titan hand seemed compressing my chest with a band of steel as I gasped for breath.

"Nina—Nina—" My own voice, so futile, sounded far away. Then I heard the steel shutter of the chart room window snap up to the top. Into the opening, a man came climbing. Mokka, with a patch of chemical fabric binding his nose and mouth like a mask. My gun sizzled at him, but the stab went wild as I staggered. Then he came leaping at me.

From the turret I was aware of other shots; a scream of agony from Polter as he was struck; thudding blows as the visor pane was crashed. And then a scream from little Green. The end! On the chart room floor grid I found myself wildly grappling the hulking Martian. My gun had clattered away as his three hundred-pound weight crashed me down. Dimly I realized that this sudden wild attack upon us was because the bandits, for their own sakes, had no desire to have any great amount of the poisoned air circulating about the little ship.

"You damned little Earth-fool," Mokka was growling. "Don't you see I'd rather not kill you?"

My puny little blows into his face only made him rasp with anger. I was trying to twist from under him. I almost made it. But abruptly he seized me around the middle, rose up and hurled me. Like a child I hurtled across the room, crashing against the alumite inner wall. The world went up into a blinding roar of light as my head struck. Dimly I was aware of dropping back to the floor. There was only blinding, roaring light, and Nina's choked scream of terror as my senses faded and I slid into the soundless abyss of unconsciousness.

I WAS at last aware that I was not dead, by the dim feeling that my head was throbbing. I was lying on something soft. Voices were here; the muffled, blended murmur of men's voices. At first they seemed very faint and far away.

Then, as my returning senses clarified a little more, I knew that the voices were close to me.

I opened my eyes at last to find myself lying on a blanket on the chart room floor. In a chair Nina was huddled, mutely staring with wide, terrified eyes to where at his chart-table Captain Mackensie was slumped, sullenly staring at the celestial diagrams spread before him. The sleek, ironic figure of Torio was beside him, his slim gray hand gesturing at the charts.

"We are now just about here, Captain?"

"Yes," Mackensie growled.

"Then we want a computation of the swiftest course, from here to Venus. You will figure it out. Tell us the gravity plate combination."

I could feel that blood was stiffly matting the hair at the back of my head, a ragged scalp wound there. I was bathed in cold sweat; weak, so dizzy still that the eerie chart room swam before me. But my strength slowly was returning. How much time had passed? Considerable, I judged, from that blood so stiffly dry in my hair. With a fumbling hand I felt of my clothes. All my instruments and weapons had been taken.

Then I saw, in another chair, the huge slumped figure of Mokka, his massive legs crossed at ease. On his knees his hand held a gun alert. The room light fell on his heavy face. It bore an expression of grim irony, as his dark eyes, watchful, roved the room.

"The segment of a parabola, Captain," the soft voice of Torio was saying. "Would that be most swift? Remember, as we turn in past the Earth, we go no closer than forty thousand miles."

"You're fools," Mackensie muttered. "This voyage will take a month or more."

"Why not?"

"The alarm will be out for us. The Interplanetary Patrol will pick us up."

"Let us hope not, Captain. You and Miss Nina would be the first to die. But there is not too much danger, I think. The modern electro-telescopes are very wonderful, but there is none, at forty thousand miles, powerful enough to pick up so small a speck of floating dust as the X-87. Or at least, not to identify it."

"I wouldn't be too sure, Torio. And at best, your food will give out."

"We will hope not," Torio smiled. His voice turned brisk. "Chart your course, Captain. Remember, we kept you alive just for this duty."

Nina said suddenly, "This silence everywhere about the ship—where are the passengers?"

Torio turned smilingly to her. "Why, little lady, didn't you know? We gave them pressure suits and put them out the keel porte. Have no fear, they'll drift down safely. Some of the suits are powered. If they're clever they'll get back to Earth."

As though this were an old-fashioned surface vessel—giving the passengers life preservers and tossing them into the middle of an ocean.

"Penelle seems to have recovered his wits," Mokka said suddenly. "See what he knows, Torio."

It turned all their gazes upon me. I was up on one elbow. "What I know about what?" I said.

TORIO leaped to his feet and stood bending over me. "Now then, you damned crime-tracker. Where is the T-catalyst? It's hidden around here somewhere. Where is it?"

"Catalyst," I mumbled. "I don't know what you mean."

Torio's foot kicked savagely at me. I tensed; the giant Mokka shifted his weapon to level down at me. I saw Mackensie flash me a glance.

"So you're going to try that too?" Torio rasped.

I stared. "He doesn't know any more about it than I do," Mackensie growled. "Nobody knew except Georg Blake, and you killed him. Find it for yourself. My guess is that Blake cast it adrift when the attack came."

"You talk without sense," Mokka put in. "Maybe the girl knows." He chuckled. "If you leave me alone with her, Torio, I can think of ways to make her tell."

"I know nothing about it," Nina gasped.

"Well, some one of you does," Torio said grimly. "We'll start with this damn crime-tracker." He leaped across the room, came back with a length of wire. My gaze strayed to the opposite wall; the treasure was there, back of a secret panel.

"Bare your chest, Penelle." Torio

stooped to where I was backed against the wall, on the floor. He tore at my shirt, exposing the flesh of my chest. "Are you going to tell?"

"I can't. I don't know."

Beyond his slim shoulder I saw Nina's face, pallid, her dark eyes glistening with horror, her lips compressed as though to stifle a scream. Torio had a small cylinder in his hand, with the naked length of wire connected to it. The wire was glowing now—red, orange, white, then violet hot.

"A few lashes with this," Torio hissed at me. "Whatever you know will come out then." His pale face was blazing.

"He will talk even more quickly if you try that on the girl," Mokka growled.

"No!" I burst out. "No, damn you! We don't know where it is! I can't tell what I don't know."

"We'll see," Torio muttered. He dangled the wire at my face. The violet light of it was blinding; the heat scorched my skin.

"Stop! Oh, stop it! I'll tell you!" Nina's anguished cry rang out. The light and heat receded from my face.

"Oh, so you're the one who's willing to tell?" Torio swung on her; snapped off the current in his wire and flung it away. "All right, where is it? But remember, by the gods, if we don't find it where you say—"

"It's there." She gestured to the wall. "My father told me it's there."

"I hope so," the giant Mokka growled. "For your sake, I hope so, little lady."

I held my breath. If by some mischance it should not be there—

Then Torio found the pressure-clip and slid the panel. With a cry of triumph as he saw the hidden little safe; he did not wait to question us on how to open it, but seized a heat-torch; melted its lock in a moment. The foot-long leaden cylinder was disclosed. There could be no question of the authenticity of its contents—its contents-dial glowed with the Gamma rays bombarding it from within. The pointer trembled at the figures indicating the strength and character of the bombardment.

"All goes well," Mokka chuckled. "We have no problems now, friend Torio. You and I can trust each other, eh? Put it back in the safe. That is as good a place

as any." The giant Martian stood up, yawning. "You work out our course with the captain. For me, I shall go down and take some rest." He grinned. "The little Earth-girl fascinates you, eh, Torio? I must leave her up here with you. Very well. I would not be one to quarrel over so small a thing. The girls of Mars please me better."

Torio, too, was smiling. They were highly pleased with themselves, these triumphant villains. "Take Penelle with you," Torio said contemptuously. "Lock him up in one of the cubbies. Have one of the men feed him."

I caught Torio's flashing, significant look, and one of grinning irony with which the Martian answered it. And Nina saw it also. A cry burst from her and she leaped up.

"You—you don't mean that! You're going to kill him, now that you haven't anything more to get out of him! Oh—Oh, please—"

Her slim little hands gripped Torio by the shoulders. I saw him tense; he stared; and then he laughed softly. "Well, my dear—when you ask me in such a way as this—"

"Oh, I do. I do."

"Then I will keep him alive."

"Don't—don't take him down there."

"You do not trust me?" His voice sounded hurt. He swung on Mokka. "Bind him and lock him up. Do not harm him. If you do, you will answer to me for it. I mean it now."

"Quite correct," Mokka agreed with a grin. "If that is your form of love-making, it is your own affair. Let us hope she will give you her favor, since you do this for her."

"Take him away," Torio commanded. "Come, Captain—let us get this course charted."

I STOOD up as Mokka prodded me with his weapon and he shoved me from the room. Was he going to kill me now out of hand? I had that feeling, and it wasn't pleasant. But he only shoved me along the starlit and moonlit roof deck. We had turned partly over. The huge ball of Earth was directly under us now; the Moon was high overhead, blurred through the glassite pressure dome. I saw, dis-

tantly, a man or two of the crew, watching us as we came down the side ladder. How many of the mutineers were there? I had no way of guessing. As Mokka shoved me from the side deck into the cross corridor, down the deck near the stern triangle, I caught a glimpse of the hunchback, Durk, staring silently at us.

Part way along the corridor the Martian shoved me into one of the passenger sleeping-cubbies. He lighted one of its tiny hooded wall lights. Then he produced lengths of wire; bound my ankles; lashed my wrists, crossed behind me.

"I'll put you into the bunk for greater comfort," he chuckled.

"Thanks."

"Oh, I do it for friend Torio, and his little lady, not for you. Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Well, I'll send you food later."

He left me, closing the door softly after him. I lay in the shadowed bunk, listening to the silence of the vibrationless little vessel. Across the small sleeping room, the window oval was visible, its alumite shutter halfway down. The open segment was very faintly starlit. Perhaps I had been dozing; my head throbbed; the dank sweat of weakness was still upon me. Then suddenly I was snapped into alertness; it seemed that I had heard a sound on the side deck outside my window.

And abruptly there was a shadow there in the half-oval window opening. Someone looking in? My heart pounded as I stared; and in a second the soundless shadow withdrew. A minute passed. Again I tensed at the sound of a faint creak. My door was opening! Beyond the bunk bottom I could see the door as very slowly, quietly it swung inward. Then the sheen of light from the corridor darkened; a blob slipped into the room; the door softly closed. The blob, hunched, stealthy, came slowly toward me.

Whatever outcry I might have made froze on my lips with my sudden rush of horror. Twitching, I strained at my bonds, but the damnable wire held and merely dug into my flesh from the effort. The hunchback! He came shambling. In one of his dangling hands he held a knife; the hooded light here in the cubby glinted on its naked blade. And in that second the light-sheen caught his face—ghastly,

lumped, twisted countenance, with bulbous parted lips as he sucked in his breath.

"Penelle—"

"Get away from me," I rasped. "You'll answer to Torio for this. By Heaven, he'll flay you alive."

"Not so loud! Easy there, I'm not here to hurt you."

What was this? Not a guttural, illiterate voice. I recalled my fleeting impression before that this Durk had the sort of voice one uses for disguise. He was beside me now; and as the light, its hood here within a foot or two, brightly illumined his face, realization came to me. Wax, embedded under the skin, by the Glotz-process of disguise. We of the Shadow Squad sometimes use it, though I must confess I had never seen it so cleverly done as here.

"Who are you?" I muttered.

He whispered, "I'm Jim—Jim Blake."

NINA'S brother! My S.S. boss had mentioned him; mysteriously he had disappeared. He was loosening the wires which bound me; and his swift whispers told me: Like his father, he had wanted to get secretly to the Moon. Throughout all the mutiny he had had no opportunity of doing anything which seemed better than posing as one of the villains. Only once had he had any chance to communicate with Nina—that time when he had gone to her room, telling her that he was going to try and kill Mokka and Torio before the attack started, and thus ward it off. And that he had not been able to do.

He was only a boy really, barely twenty; he was trembling with eagerness and excitement now as he cast me loose and I rose up out of the bunk and stood beside him.

"You armed?" I whispered.

"No; only this knife. I've tried to get something else but can't."

"Any of the crew with weapons?"

"No, I don't think so. Knives, machinery bars and things like that. Mokka and Torio seemed to have everything."

"How many in the crew?"

"Five, and me. One got killed in the fight. Another wounded. There were two or three others planted among the passengers. Maybe more. They got killed, too. Oh, what shall we do? All I could

think of was to get here and release you."

"And I damn well thank you, Jim." I clapped him on the back. "Look here, you keep the knife. Heaven knows you may need it."

"What are we going to do?" he whispered eagerly. "Is—is Nina all right?"

"Yes, I guess so. Up in the turret. Have you seen Mokka?"

"That Martian? No. What can we do?"

Certainly I had no very clear idea. Five men, and Mokka and Torio. They were not very many to be dispersed about the ship, and we had a fair chance of cautiously moving around without encountering any of them. Torio, I figured, was still in the chart room, with Nina and Mackensie. Mokka, perhaps, was asleep somewhere. Young Blake had no very clear idea of where the other five might be.

"Come on," I whispered. "Let's take a look at the chart room." If by any wild chance we could overcome Torio and get the electric weapons—

We got up to the roof deck without encounter. From one of the midships ladders I stared forward to the chart room. I could see Torio and Mackensie still in there, at the table with the charts. And now, beside the chart room, where he could command its door and also the control turret, a huge blob was lurking. Was it Mokka?

It wasn't. I made the figure out more clearly as he moved a trifle.

"That's one of the crew," Blake whispered. "Look—he's got a ray-gun."

I could see it. I turned back. "Got to try something else. The midships keel pressure porte," I whispered. "Ever been down there, Jim?"

He stared. "No. What's your idea? Pressure porte?"

"There's also a pressure porte in the dome, just over the control turret. If we can get some Erentz pressure suits down in the keel—"

Whether he understood me or not, I didn't stop to find out. I had still only a very vague idea myself, just the glimmer of a desperate plan which might work out.

"You better lead," I suggested. "I'll direct you. Len Smith showed me down there. If we run into anybody you can fool them long enough for me to jump them."

Unless it might be the Martian, with his belt bristling with electronic guns. Vehemently I prayed we could keep clear of him. Silently, furtively, we padded into the lower corridor. No sound. With young Blake close ahead of me, we went down onto the mid-level catwalk. Still there was nothing save eerie lights and deserted rooms. Nothing? A ghastly reek came through a doorway at me. I glanced in.

"The dead," Blake whispered with a shudder. "Said they were going to cast them out a porte, but they didn't yet."

THE dead. That catwalk room was a reeking, ghastly charnel house. A good thirty bodies—men, women and children of three worlds, piled in a horrible litter. I gasped. All the passengers were here. There had been no disembarking of passengers, as Torio had ironically described to Nina.

We went on. Descended another level. We were in the keel now. Suddenly footsteps sounded on the catwalk above us. One of the crew passed along it. Fortunately he did not look down through the grid.

"Got by that by a margin," I whispered. "Straight ahead, Jim. Then half a flight down."

From one of the storehouse rooms just ahead of us a man suddenly emerged. I shrank against the dark corridor wall.

"Oh, you, Durk," the man said softly. "Lookit what I found in here—cask of alcoholite. Good drinkin', Durk."

Jim Blake is only a boy, but he didn't shrink from his job. I was tensed to leap past him upon the man in the doorway. The fellow abruptly saw me. He squealed, "Look, behind you—"

That's all he ever did say. Blake went at him like a little springing leopard. The knife flashed; the man went down with only a choked gurgle of blood in his throat.

"Got him," Blake murmured.

"Good enough. Come on."

The emergency pressure porte was to one side of the corridor, an oblong compartment, with one tiny segment of the tubelight up in its ceiling sending down a faint pallid sheen. The inner door here was open so that normal air pressure was in the porte.

"Luck better be with us now," I murmured. "Let's see what they've left in the emergency equipment room."

It was here on the other side the corridor. My heart pounded with triumph. There were plenty of Erentz suits and helmets here. Both young Blake and I had used the familiar Carpley suit and helmet for outer stratosphere flying. These were not so very different, save that the electronic current in the double shell of the fabric circulated faster, for the more speedy absorption of the interior pressure within the suit, when worn in the vacuum of Space.

We had them on in a moment, with the huge goggling helmets buckled at the throat. Through my glassite bull's-eye I could see young Blake's weirdly disguised face. He was trying to smile; but he was probably pretty fairly frightened. For which I don't blame him; I was myself. The baggy, still deflated suits hung on us in great grotesque folds. I touched my metal-tipped glove to the metal plate on his shoulder for audiphone contact.

"Think you can work it all right?" I murmured.

"Yes. Yes, sure."

"Keep with me when we get outside," I cautioned.

"Yes. I'll—I'll try."

I was in an agony of apprehension that someone would come and catch us here before we could get the porte closed. But no one did. Our pressure suits caused no trouble. The Erentz mechanism controls, renewal of the interior air, and the pressure-absorbing current, are simple enough to work. Within a minute our suits were bloated, huge. And then as we stepped into the pressure room, I saw what clarified and altered all my vague plans. A complete get-away! It was possible now, for here on a rack of the pressure room floor lay a little volplane—emergency Space-sled, its canoe-like hull some twenty feet long, its wings for air gliding folded against its sides. It was provisioned with emergency food and water. I bent over it with hurried, triumphant examination. The stern had a tiny outboard rocket engine; and in the bow were small manually controlled gravity plates. It was ready; the descent to Earth in it could be made, with fair safety, and perhaps in a week.

WE slid the inner pressure door closed. An exit out of a pressure room can be swiftly made. We opened the small vents of the outer panels. The air of the room started hissing out into the vacuum outside.

"Easy," I murmured. "Not too fast. We don't want to get blown out."

Within a minute we could open the outer door; the last escaping air went with a thin hissing rush. At the threshold before us yawned the vast abyss of Space. I stood for a second gazing down at the great mottled reddish ball of Earth. Forty thousand miles down to it. There was a little launching rack out here to hold the volplane. We slid it out; locked it into position. I had told Blake now what I was going to try and do. He demurred at waiting here in the volplane, but I forced him.

"You can see up from here," I murmured. "Somebody has to launch it. When I give you the signal, shove it off. You can pick us up."

"If we have luck," I murmured it to myself.

He nodded comprehension.

Then, cautiously, I stepped from the threshold, out into Space. An empty abyss of forty thousand miles, down to the Earth's surface beneath me. Though I knew very well what would happen to me, of course, I must say that I had to steel myself grimly, to step off from the brink of that threshold. It made my senses momentarily reel. But the weird sensation was gone in a moment.

It was like a diver taking a step under water. I did not fall. I had let myself off the brink gingerly; and I felt my body sluggishly moving out a foot or two, with all the universe slowly, dizzily turning over. I am no skilled mathematician. Given the gross tonnage of the little X-87, doubtless astronomers could figure the relation of its gravity pull upon me, so close, compared to the giant bulk of the Earth, so far away. Perhaps even at forty thousand miles, and against the pull of the Moon, some two hundred thousand miles above me, and the X-87 only a foot or two—the Earth would slowly have drawn me down. But I knew that there was an aura of the vessel's artificial interior gravity out here. Len Smith had told me of many

tests which had been made between the Earth and the Moon.

At all events, I drifted downward a few feet, like a waterlogged chunk of wood slowly turning over. Then slowly I came back; landed in a clumsy, struggling heap against the ship's glistening alumite side. To each of us, himself is the center of the Universe. Cautiously I stood up. At once the vessel seemed my little world, lying flat on its side under me, with the reddish giant Earth to my right, the round white Moon to the left; and over my head, the great glittering vault of the Heavens, star-strewn upon a background of black velvet.

I seemed to weigh perhaps a pound or two. Like a fly, gingerly I crawled along the vessel's bulging side. Then I came to the dome. The roof deck within was grotesquely tilted on end. The vision of it was blurred by the glassite pressure plates, but it seemed unoccupied, slowly righting itself as I crawled up the bulge, cautiously clinging to avoid having my own efforts cast me off.

Then at last I came to the top, with the little X-87 right side up under my feet and the Moon above me. I knew that from the roof deck I could be seen up here as a distorted, shadowy blob. My heart was pounding with the fear that an alarm would come, but none did. I reached, at last, the little pressure porte in the dome over the control turret and chart room. I had two deflated Erentz suits and helmets lashed to me. The emergency panel was here, like a trap door under me. Through its transparent bull's-eye I could see into the small, dim compartment under me. The lower panel was open, but there was a lever out here by which I could slide it closed. Would it make any sound and alarm Torio in the chart room under it? I held my breath as it slid. There was no commotion.

IT took only a minute to let the air out of the little sealed pressure room. Then cautiously I dropped down into it, with the interior gravity gripping me so that suddenly I was my normal weight once more. Breathless, tense, I lay flat, with my suit deflating as I stared down into the chart room. Nina and Torio were there. I could see them, but not hear them.

She was in a chair, with him standing before her. And then I caught my breath. What was this? An angle of the control turret also was within my line of vision. A crimsoned figure lay there; the body of Captain Mackensie. He had finished his work; charted the course—and this was his reward.

A little of the outside of the turret also was visible. It did not seem that the guard was out there now. Had he been sent away, so that Torio now might be alone with Nina? Fervently I hoped so.

There was no alarm as I cautiously slid the trap in the chart room ceiling.

"Oh—Oh, please—let me alone!"

"But, my dear little lady, do you want me to kill Penelle? Surely you—" The snaky Torio got no further than that. I was some fifteen feet directly above him. Perhaps he was aware of my hurtling body but he had no chance to avoid it as I crashed down upon him. The work-knife in my gloved, metal-fingered hand stabbed. He went limp under me, with blood gushing from his chest where the knife had gone to its hilt.

My helmet was up in the pressure room. "Nina, climb up!" I slid the little wall ladder into position for her. "Ack, now! Get into the pressure suit up there. Inflate it, and wait for me."

White and grim, she obeyed wordlessly. I started her up the ladder, swung for the hidden wall safe. Would the leaden cylinder of the catalyst still be here? It was. I strapped it quickly to my belt.

Then I dashed for the instrument cubby. A little explosive time-bomb. . . . I found one; and hurried with it into the control turret, where I placed it against the mechanisms of the Erentz current—that huge electronic stream which circulated throughout all the double-shelled plates of the vessel to absorb the inner pressure. Ten minutes? Would that give us time enough?

Nina was in the pressure suit when in a minute more I reached the upper room.

"Good enough, Nina. Now, the helmet! Your brother Jim is outside—safe."

My heart leaped with triumph at her gasp of joy. "Oh, Fred—"

"Come on, hurry."

We were garbed, ready and through the outer porte in another minute or two. My hand clung to Nina's metal shoulder.

"Careful, there's no gravity. Don't shove yourself off."

We were like two crawling flies on the smooth outer surface of the pressure dome. Still there was no alarm. We got part way down the side. Young Blake, in the poised little volplane farther down, saw us. I waved my arm, and he shoved his tiny craft off. Like a log in water it floated out twenty feet or so, turned and came drifting diagonally back.

"We'll dive for it," I murmured. "He'll pick us up."

I DID not see the emerging figure, here beside us in the starlight; I did not even know that there was a tiny pressure porte here on the side deck at one of the bull's-eyes. But suddenly a panel slid wide. Upon a rush of air, a huge bloated figure came out; struck against me, with its arms gripping me.

Mokk! I could see his heavy, snarling face through the visor pane. His body and mine, as we gripped each other, toppled off into emptiness. Amazing, weightless combat. The whole Universe was turning over as we floated out, kicking, flailing, floundering. He was trying to reach the knife at his belt. He got it, but somehow my mailed fist was able to strike it away. It went floating off. The thing to me was a weird chaos. I tried to kick away, but he clung, his great hands with metal fingers gouging at the fabric of my suit to rip it. Once, his hand clapped to my shoulder. With sudden audiphone contact I heard his rasping voice:

"The end of you, Earthman."

But, thank God, it wasn't. Abruptly, by some fortunate chance I was able to snatch my knife from its belt-sheath. It ripped into Mokk's fabric. I was aware of a little flash of deranged electricity; his suit deflated. Ghastly human explosion—every tiny cell of his body bursting with its inner pressure. The rush of released, dissipating expanding air from his suit sprayed bursting gore upon me. Gore, and the noisome pink-white foam which had been his flesh.

I shoved the ghastly thing away; saw myself now seemingly upon my back, grotesquely struggling to turn erect with the X-87 hanging diagonally some twenty feet away. Nina was still clinging to its side,

with the volplane gliding near her. She dove, and Blake hauled her aboard. And then he shoved to me; gripped me at last.

"All right," I gasped. "Good enough, Jim—you sit here with Nina—"

At the bow of our fragile little craft, I set the gravity plates for an intensification of Earth's attraction. I set them to the fullest of their power. For a moment we slowly turned over, with all the Heavens, the Moon, Earth and the little X-87 in a dizzying swing. Then we steadied, with the Earth ahead of us.

Clinging, I shoved myself back in the canoe-like volplane, to Nina and Blake. Touched them. "We're starting. See the ship?"

The little vessel, close behind and above us, was slowly receding.

"But they'll discover us!" young Blake murmured. "They have telescopes—they'll discover us—and the X-87 can catch us easily."

"Maybe," I muttered. "Maybe not—"

THEN it came!

It was a weird, soundless explosion. We saw a jagged little series of flashes as the Erentz current burst out. Then, with a puff of light, soundlessly the vessel flew apart . . . a million fragments of bursting ship and bursting human bodies. All about us was the glistening, starlit shimmer of

them, like a fountain spray of pyrotechnic beauty. Then there was just emptiness of Interplanetary Space where the ship had been. But a cloud of shimmering particles hung there, like myriad specks of stardust to mark where a tiny world had exploded. After a time their little gravity drew them together into a loose ball of shattered Matter hanging balanced by the myriad Celestial forces. Some of the larger pieces were starting around it, little satellites with the inertia of their velocity balancing the gravity of the central mass. A new tiny System, here in the vast Heavens. It drifted off, finding its new orbit—drifted as we dropped away from it until at last it was only a shining speck among the billions of giant worlds. And then we could no longer see it.

* * * * *

I have little to add. You all know the details of our long but safe descent, with the Interplanetary patrol picking us up before we reached the stratosphere. And now, as a postscript, I may say that Miss Nina Blake has allowed me to announce that very presently she will be applying for the publication of her marriage. And she will name Frederick Penelle, of the Great-New York Shadow Squad.

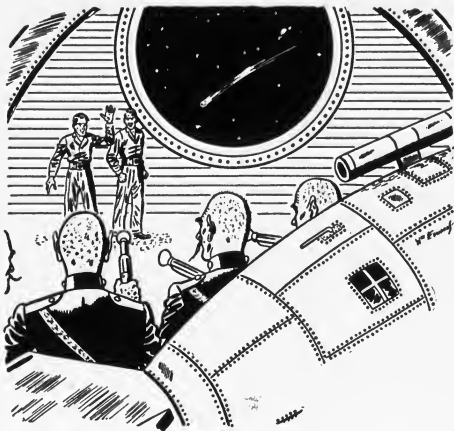
Earth-Moon Flight 9 certainly was not star-crossed, for me.

WHO are the standouts of the '40 season? **BASEBALL STORIES** gives you the diamond dope, straight down the groove, in a great article by young, brilliant baseball pundit Arch Murray—**THE STARS OF 1940**. There's a knockout novelet by Curtis Bishop—**THE BIG GUN**—and other novels and shorts by such crack story-tellers as Lin Davies, Jack Wiggins, Tom O'Neill, Jack Kofoed and others. Be sure to get your copy of



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Sphere of the Never-Dead

By SAM CARSON

The Three Brains of Taval had spoken! Kenley must die! The cheerful youth from an earlier time-strata must enter Death-in-Life. Nothing less than a cosmic revolt could postpone his decreed fate.

THE warm, night air whipped Bob Winslow's face as he crossed the open space before Kerla Research, Inc., to the car where Jim Kenley, his roommate and lifelong friend was waiting. A storm was roaring in from the west, revealing the city's skyline at frequent intervals silhouetted against a background of sheet lightning. Bob should have been elated to the point of near explosion, over the news he could give Jim. Bob was to be promoted for his achieve-

ments in polarization of the newly discovered Decka light stream, and for his development of the electronoscope that had given astronomy a new universe to explore.

Instead, Bob had a sixth sense of actual fear, as if something invisible—invincible, was trailing him. Recently this feeling had come, sometimes at night, arousing him abruptly, as if actually touched. All today, and now tonight, the feeling grew that a Presence was at hand. Small matter if he was to be director of Kerla Re-

search, Inc., at the age of twenty-six. Bob wondered if his nerves were shot. Maybe, but he felt steady enough.

The car was at the curb and Jim, as far removed from a world of scientific research as one could imagine, swung open the door. "Mean storm coming," he called. "Must be hail in it. Let's scam for home. We can listen in to that night ball game."

Water splashed Bob's face. He was thinking, as he crossed the pavement, that Jim lived as much in the world of sports as he in the field of scientific investigation. Jim Kenley worked hard as an auditor in the daytime. Off duty, it might be football, horse racing, tennis or baseball. He liked all of them, and could hardly wait for the score, or result of a standout event. Perhaps that was why Bob liked Jim so well.

Bob was at the car as the first wave of rain and wind, broken into needle point mist, obscured lights and broke over them. He saw that, and then more. He saw Jim catapulted from the car as if pushed by invisible hands. Then Bob felt himself gripped, and felt, not chill rain, but absolute zero. It surely took no more time than the fraction of a second, before he plunged into a white world—a world without motion, without sound. But in that flicker of time fading so swiftly, Bob saw men in strange raiment, at first opaque, then solidifying. He saw, too, an elongated, golden red craft without wheels; and from it emerged a tall man with a silver skull cap. After that—absolute zero. It couldn't have been a point above. That was Bob's last thought—absolute zero.

A TIRED sleeper arouses slowly, hovering between consciousness and dream-land because the mind dreads taking over mastership of the body. Such was the way Bob Winslow experienced his awakening. It was so comfortable, to rouse slightly, then plunge back into soft, warm slumber. At last voices disturbed his brain, and light beat against closed lids. With a sigh Bob opened his eyes.

After one startled look Bob closed them briefly. He wasn't in his room. He was in a strange place, a room with tinted, translucent walls and concealed lights. The bed, sheet, everything about it, were odd. Bob started to get up. Sharp pains

streaked along arms and legs. They passed and he tried it again. There was so much to take in: the squat chairs of semi-transparent material, the room with a screen at the farther end, flanked with metallic disks. The room itself, while rectangular, had curved corners.

There was a peculiar scent in the room, pungent, yet not unpleasant. It had an exhilarating effect. And Bob thought suddenly of Jim Kenley. He had to laugh then, for Jim bounced up beside him, eyes wide. "Huh," he said. "Tornado hit us? What sort of hospital is this?"

It came back to Bob—his departure from the laboratory building, to the car as the storm bore down. Then the figures—and the machine! That wasn't a dream. For Bob knew he was wide awake now, and this place was real enough. "Maybe," he answered Jim. "I suppose it is a sort of hospital. But where?"

"I'm hungry," Jim announced, yawning. "Ouch! Damned funny. Pains all over. Like I'd been running ten miles. Sa-a-ay! Bob, I got hit out of the car, and somebody piled ice on me. Hey—where the hell's my clothes. Let's get out of this dump. Are there any nurses anywhere?"

The disks across the room began to whirl, without noise. Before either could speak again, the screen began to send out a soft glow. Then a figure materialized, that of a man, full sized, in a sort of garment fitting like waist jacket and tight trousers, but in a single piece. The man wore a helmet, chromium bright, and looked no more than forty. Bob and Jim waited, the former fully aware that a tremendous change, somehow, had come into their lives. As for Jim Kenley, he merely grunted. "Movies. Gimme Mickey Mouse, or Popeye. T' hell with Flash Gordon."

Then the figure on the screen spoke. His words didn't come from a speaker. As certain as he believed his own eyes and ears, Bob realized the man was actually talking to them, from this screen. "I perceive the actinic frequency treatment has revived you," he said, rather amiably. "Good. Did either of you experience muscular pains yet?"

"Say," Jim Kenley exclaimed, "what t'hell's it all about. Yeah, I got pains. And why? Somebody slugged me, that's why.

"And if we're okay now, how about sending our clothes around, and no bill. I didn't start it. And where are we anyway?"

The man on the screen frowned. "You are not Winslow. No?"

"I'm Jim Kenley. That's Bob. Say—any of you folks phone Bob's outfit he got hurt or something?"

"No." The figure came nearer, growing in perspective. "I believe it is time to inform you it would be somewhat difficult to notify anyone in your period of time what happened. You are now existing in the year 3300."

The pit of Bob's stomach grew chill. Somehow, he had felt from the moment of awakening, that he had left either his space, or his time zone. It fit too well with that presentment, and the brief glimpse of their kidnapers. And as his alert mind began to grasp their situation, Bob went through panic. There were so many things he wanted to complete, to eat, to see. There was a girl, not disturbing him yet, but nevertheless in the background. There was his whole world, the one he knew, and that was the world in which he wanted to live, and die. Bob's curiosity wasn't to explore space. He wanted to better fellow men, and gain information for them. He wondered if Jim could get the staggering impact of this calm announcement of their fate.

Jim's reaction was typical. "Baloney. You gotta damned good act, brother. And I don't know why you're rehearsing on us." Jim sprang out of bed. "Come on, Bob. Let's get out of this booby hatch." In tight fitting pajamas of strange fabric, he started around his bed. He struck an object, bounded back. Whatever it was, Bob couldn't see it. As for Jim, swearing, fists doubled, he charged. This time he went back and struck the floor, turning a complete somersault.

The man on the screen chuckled. "Some take it easy. Some don't. Winslow, I perceive you understand more readily, till you get a more complete explanation. Good. Rest assured you shall get it. Now, if you and your companion walk directly to this screen, I promise you entry to your future quarters. Go there, put on clothing you will find, and wait your summons to food."

Bob nodded. "May I ask a question?" "Of course."

"Granted this is the year 3300, give me a reason to believe you. A fundamental one. I live in the Twentieth Century, in the year 1940. We recognize the theory that time and space are relative, that the past can still exist. But the future—"

The man's head nodded approvingly. "A sound question, Winslow. For that request, I introduce myself. I am Vasper, assigned to instruct you. Believe me when I say you actually are in the year 3300 and upon the North American continent, in a region once known as Arkansas. So much for that. You grasp the falseness of past time, balanced against space. You understand dimly, I am certain—for it was shortly after 1940 that the Palonian theory of the spiral universe was developed from previous ideas. Well, we know now that the same rule applied to time and space without beginning, has no final boundary. Thus, if there is no beginning, there is no end. If past time and space zones exist, then so must future time and space zones exist. We have proved that very definitely, in your case. - I must go now," Vasper added quickly. He smiled, eyes flicking to the dazed Jim Kenley struggling to his feet. "The barrier is gone now. We put it up, for unbelievers. Walk into the screen. I shall visit you there, within the hour."

THE disks ceased whirling. The screen faded to flat white, and Jim Kenley leaned against his bed, mumbling. "A nut," he said. "A goof, with the baseball season coming on—and the Belmont Stakes—and—everything. And my job—a bonus if I finished by the rst of the month!"

Bob went across to his friend. He felt sick, shaky. The impact of Vasper's revelation was sufficient to daze any man, Bob felt. Now he patted Jim's shoulder. "Then we're two nuts, Jim."

"We're in something, too big to grasp all at once. I'll stick by you, Jim. Come on, let's do what—what Vasper said."

Jim looked long and searchingly at Bob. He gripped his hand. "I'm dumb," he said slowly. "Yeah, I saw men, and a funny looking thing like a gold tank—before they jumped us."

"I saw it, too, Jim."

"Then—then we're really somewhere else." Jim shuddered, then straightened his body. "Okay Bob. I'll try and take it, if I don't go nuts. We walk into the screen, huh? Boy—if that isn't hot. Walking into screens over a thousand years ahead of your time—or is it after."

Still bewildered, the two walked slowly to the screen, kept on as the disks sprang into life again. Bob flinched involuntarily, but he felt no obstacle. They just walked through the screen as if it were a shadow, and they were in a smaller room, with beds similar to the ones they had vacated. There was a screen, much smaller, and chairs of translucent, blue substance. The ceiling was low and glowed faintly, as if reflecting daylight. But there were no windows. Jim walked to a door, and it swung open of itself. "Huh. Kind of an electric eye. Hey, look. Monkey suits."

There was clothing, and the metal helmets like Vasper wore. Bob rubbed his chin. "Well, we might as well try 'em on."

"Yeah," Jim agreed. "But if anybody else I know sees me, I'll be ribbed for life. Say, that's the funniest stuff. Soft as velvet, but thick. Oh well—"

They got into everything but the helmets. "Now what," Jim wondered, handling the headpiece. "Lighter'n aluminum. And it's got earphones, or something. See."

"Put them on," a voice suggested behind them. Turning, they saw Vasper as he stepped casually through the screen. He was a six footer, built like a halfback, with ruddy hair and blue eyes. "We must all wear them in Taval."

"Why?" Jim demanded bluntly.

"Why? For instructions from The Three, of course. They are our leaders and no man may be out of their reach."

At a nod from Bob, Jim slipped on the featherweight headgear. Bob found it didn't interfere with ordinary conversation. Vasper regarded them, smiling. "I know how you feel," he said. "My special task covers your century. That's why I speak your language so well. All Taval speaks English, with variations, for we are descendants of North American peoples. But first, you are to go with me to the Twentieth Century dining-room." He led the way to the screen. By now Bob wasn't surprised at entering a room with a famil-

iar look. It was a restaurant, with a white coated waiter, and the smell of steaming foods. "Boy," Jim cried. "I could eat a four-inch steak smothered with onions. And coffee—smell it Bob. Just smell."

Bob felt like an animal, was conscious of a hunger he had never possessed before. Obviously Jim was in the same mood, for he fairly yanked a bowl of soup from the waiter's grasp. And there was steak, juicy and appetizing. There was bread, coffee, vegetables and even pie. And as they ate, Vasper sat there, smiling as if very much pleased. At last both men knew they were filled. Jim sighed, reached dreamily for a cigarette. "Anyway," he reflected, "it's worth this namby pamby business—a feed like that Okay Vasper—let's hear details."

Vasper got up. "I've warned you sufficiently," he said. "I think perhaps I had better take you outside. To see Taval."

"That the name of your city?" Jim inquired, winking at Bob. "How far is it from our home?"

"A few hundred miles," Vasper answered. "And more than a thousand years. this way—"

THEY walked into the inevitable screen Vasper indicated, and at once found themselves in a green world, almost jungle-like in appearance, with what appeared to be a mist overhead concealing the sun. There were buildings, all domed and apparently resting upon queer looking cushions. There were paths through trees, palms, hardwood, all sorts of flowers and shrubs, but no streets. Through the foliage people were moving leisurely, but not in profusion.

"What's this, a park?" Jim asked.

"Taval," Vasper answered. It was then Bob, drawn by curiosity, began to study the sky. It wasn't blue, but ashy gray. Then he exclaimed, peering more closely. "Why—we're under a great dome—a mile-high one," he cried.

Vasper nodded, smiling. "That's right. Taval—one of the domed cities. There are others—many. All of the Brotherhood."

Jim found a bench nearby, sat down. "One story houses on cushions. With funny round tops. No streets. Everything under glass, or something. My good gosh, and encore. Why did I ever leave home, or did I?"

Bob joined him. He was excited, and yet strongly moved. His keen, scientific mind told him thousands of problems had been solved here in Taval, that Vasper surely was right about the time element. It would take time to grasp all this. And it was too soon to puzzle why he and Jim had been brought here. Now he forced a smile. "Suppose," he said, "you tell us, in a general way, what it's all about."

Vasper sat down between them, while Jim fumbled for another cigarette. "Who'll win the World Series?" he muttered. "The Yanks, of course. But—and there's Placer in the Belmont, smacking 'em over in the Derby the other day. Placer against Agate Second! What a race. And Tennessee and Southern Cal—and Texas A & M. Will they be out in front this fall? Gosh—amighty. It happened a thousand odd years ago, all this. And I dunno how it came out. I—" Jim's mouth opened. He slapped his knee. "Great day, Bob. Suppose I could check up on all the Derbies, and World Series, and Bowl games for ten years, and got back. Wouldn't I rake in the dough. Say, that's an idea?"

"There is no money in Taval," Vasper said quietly. "You do your task and you are cared for." He turned to Bob. "We are Americans in Taval. At least," he added, "the descendants of your stock. The machine age you created with the United States as the driving force, eventually brought chaos. That and natural disasters. We had few survivors in the world, by comparison. And then there came Taval, for whom this city is named. He discovered the key that divorced time and space—"

"He did," Bob broke in excitedly. "How? We were working on the theory of overtaking time—by spiraling our speed."

Vasper nodded. "Yes, that resulted, of course, in the two adventures to our satellite you called the moon. They were disastrous because you were ignorant of ether frequencies at the upper end of the cosmic ray band. But you cannot overtake space by the spiral theory. Always there would be fractional time, and, therefore, you're always bound by ordinary dimensions."

"One million—two million—ten million, as Amos would say," Jim Kenley put in. "How clear you are, Grandma."

"Shut up," Bob told him. "Then how did Taval work his theory, Vasper? That screen—is it a kind of fourth-dimensional business?"

"It is. But that was worked out later, by a group of his pupils. We use the same base idea of Taval's, as he perfected it back in 2800. Discarding time to overtake, or unwind space as you might define it, he chose to search for a physical way of stopping motion—"

"I've got it," Bob cried, leaping to his feet. "It came to me—the night—the night of the storm—absolute zero! That's it! Absolute zero to stop motion, and therefore, eliminate time and space!"

"Sit down," Jim advised. "I'm Napoleon and you're Little Caesar. Remember? And tomorrow's Mayday. . . . Absolute zero, huh? Well, I said I felt like I was in a chunk of ice that night."

"But this screen affair," Bob put in. "It—it's different."

"Our method of transportation entirely," Vasper affirmed. "Yes, we need no streets. No walks, save for exercise. Throughout Taval there are outdoor screens, for convenience. Winslow, I said Taval's idea is unchanged. It is, although refined. You were right about your absolute zero. We came to you that way. In the only machine we employ today, save for the manufacture of the skydome, and our laboratory equipment. With absolute zero stopping motion, there is neither time nor space. You know that. Well, the first contact, creating new motion, brings one to the time in which he is revived."

"Freezing like that would kill anybody," Jim protested. "It breaks up tissue."

"You and Winslow suffered all stoppage of motion in approximately one-two millionth of a second, my skeptical friend. We brought you to the portable laboratory, kept you in suspended animation for ten days, then revived you in another fraction as short as the means we took possession of your bodies."

"How long did the process last?" Bob asked.

"It was exactly thirty days since you reached Taval."

JIM whistled. "No wonder I was hungry. Thirty days."

"We injected fluids," Vasper told him.

"You see, Kenley, we assimilate food here now chiefly in liquid form. Now the screen—we have reduced a margin of absolute zero between the walls of the screen, to a width that your obsolete measuring system cannot cover. The screen itself is not a physical wall. It is—well, unspatial. That is too advanced for either of you to grasp now. It is sufficient to explain that you touch the absolute zero wall, and are revived, all so instantaneously, that you are not conscious of the change. And in that transition, you reach any destination you head for."

"Simple," Jim groaned. "So very, very simple. Okay, and I thought Aladdin—or whoever he was, just happened to be a myth." Jim studied Vasper thoughtfully. "And now, my good friend, why are we here?"

"You," Vasper announced, "are here because of your friend Winslow. We are few, and we need brains, and fit bodies. Winslow has both. We search the back centuries constantly for men—and women. Men with brains to keep our race, and our world existing. We placed the skydome over all our cities because the sun will cool for a thousand years. We have learned that and must start now, to keep our plant and animal life from perishing, till the cycle ends and the earth grows hot again. You, Jim Kenley, were brought along because you are Winslow's friend, and your company will be of advantage while he adjusts himself to what must be an amazing change in his career."

"A master work of understatement," Bob observed. "Maybe I was serving my time to better purpose. It was all I wanted to do. Do you think I'm ever to be happy here?"

"What sort of ball clubs do you have?" Jim fired at Vasper. "I'll bet there's not even a golf club."

Vasper laughed. "You're due for some surprises, Kenley."

For Bob Winslow, there followed hours that intrigued him. Only here and there did he meet Taval residents. Vasper explained that by going directly from point to point, that there was no traffic, that all duty hours were staggered because Taval, in fact, was as well illuminated as by day. The chief plants were operated by robot

workers, who could reproduce their kind in other factories. "Taval, like our other cities, now needs only brains," Vasper went on. "We maintain sports here to keep our bodies fit." As he spoke, Vasper undid a tiny container hanging to one shoulder, extracted a handful of tiny pellets and swallowed them. At Bob's look of curiosity he smiled. "Energy," he said. "But we use more fluid food than these. Come, while I take you to The Three, your companion is at liberty to go across there to the stadium of sports."

"I'd like to see that too," Bob said. Vasper nodded. He pointed to an outside screen. They entered it and found themselves in a great open air arena. Upon the grass-mantled field a game was in progress, not unlike basketball. Farther away, a group of young women, the first Bob had seen, clad in trunks like any miss of the Twentieth Century, engaged in a game, somewhat like tennis, save that the ball was larger and a dozen took part in each court. Youths were jogging along a circular track, and in the distance was a narrow, but rather long swimming pool. The arena itself, was double the size of any Bob had ever seen before. "I think," Vasper observed, "that should interest Kenley. And now, if you have been listening carefully, there comes an order for us."

Bob heard it now, a voice speaking slowly, some of the words not recognizable. The speaker had no accent. Vasper was watching Bob. "The language has changed," he explained. "That was Fator, the senior of Taval's Three. He must examine you, assign you your future duties."

"Future duties!"

"Of course. Why else did The Three send for you out of time? Your brain is needed, if we prepare to save the world in the centuries to come. There are others we are summoning, if we had more apparatus. Unfortunately, certain elements are scarce, and we have but one—the one in which they brought you here." So speaking, Vasper led the way to another screen.

SOMEHOW, Bob had expected to find an aged, bearded man. Instead, Fator, senior of The Three looked no more than sixty, was clean shaven and his hair was hardly gray. He was at a desk, in a room

minus windows, and very similar to the other interiors Bob had already seen here. Fator had his hands upon an inclosed cylinder which gave forth a whirring sound. He wore a look of deep concentration, and Vasper motioned for silence till the cylinder ceased whirring. Then Fator rose, walked across the room and held out a hand.

"I bid you welcome to Taval, Winslow," he spoke slowly, in his stilted manner. "You will find more—more sympathy here, than in your time. More than you had in your own research laboratory."

"Why—you know about that?"

Fator nodded, cold gray eyes flicking over Bob's body. "I notice you are well kept. Splendid. You shall have the same food as you are accustomed to, sir. Your duties are to be with an advanced group—charting our universe—as we reach the Pelior Dark."

Bob stared. "The Pelior Dark," Fator explained, "is as visible now as the so-called—Oh yes, the Milky Way was in your century. We are going to strike it in three hundred and twenty nine years."

"We charted the dark regions with the iconoscope," Bob put in eagerly. "Till then, our astronomers, working with glass scopes, had only a vague idea."

"Still," Fator told him, "our speed toward the first of these abysmal regions accelerated in the last two centuries. Our sun first will expand, then contract. Now you see what we are preparing for."

Bob smiled. "But we'll be gone sir, before this happens."

Fator's smile was enigmatic. "Perhaps—not. For some of us. I trust you are reconciled, Winslow. You cannot go back. Otherwise, you are as free as any resident of Taval. You must remain inside the dome, unless it is directed otherwise. Our sun is two degrees colder today, and ice covers the northern hemisphere outside. You could not escape, but I hardly have to warn you. There are plenty of matters to interest you in our midst. You are that type. As for your companion—"

"Kenley's a sensible chap," Bob cut in. "True, he lives for sports. But he is an excellent auditor—I mean," he floundered, "good at calculation and all that."

"We have machines for that, in our cities," Fator replied. And the way he said

it, made Bob feel a tiny cold shudder.

Fator closed the interview with the word that he—Bob Winslow, would be answerable to the Senior of Taval's ruling Three. He further said that Vasper would continue as his instructor for the present. Then, with a nod, he turned back to his cylinder. It was whirring as Bob and Vasper stepped into the screen.

They emerged within the sports arena again, and Bob noted Jim, watching the games. Then he thought of Fator's cylinder. "That?" Vasper replied in answer to a question. "He was dictating. We use a system—phonetic. The fingers of both hands control Taval rays and thereby, the phonetic words. Fator is writing a story of Taval, or rather, bringing the history up to date, with a plan for his successor to carry on. That is," Vasper added, "if he doesn't carry on himself."

"What do you mean?" Bob demanded. "You haven't discovered immortality!"

Vasper shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. But—well, there are whispers. It would be death to mention it openly, what I have heard. Do not ask me. But in time, listen to the whispers."

Jim Kenley trotted across the great field, looking more cheerful. "Say, I told 'em about baseball and they're willing to take a crack at it. And that tennis business the gals have is red hot. Some swell looking kids around here. Hey Vasper—they ever marry in Taval?"

"If The Three decrees, yes. Otherwise, no."

Jim's face dropped. "Heck, just as I had a redhead squinting at me in that way. Oh well, when I wake up she'll be gone, and I'll probably find I'm fired for this spree. Where to now, Friend Vasper."

FOR days they examined Taval, learned that it took in far more territory than they had imagined. They visited the vat farms, where giant plants grew, blossomed and produced heat in the matter of days, fed by chemicals directly to the roots.

They visited factories, where food was prepared as concentrates, where plastics from elements and vegetable tissue were compounded, all by other machines, not at all like Bob's conception of robots. Indeed, a lot of machines were operated by tiny mechanisms, all lens and coils, capable of

being carried around by hand. The Taval ray, Bob learned, was a development starting with the so-called electric eye of the Twentieth Century. And it didn't take him long to recognize many fundamentals created by earlier Americans. Then it was he who came to recognize others, brought into Taval as he. Vasper showed him a stout, slow-moving person called Miller, who had ridden on Fulton's Clermont. Miller was a chemist. And there was a slight figure out of the Twenty Second Century, Gregg by name. He was worrying about the First World Confederacy threatened with breakup when he was removed to Taval. Gregg, Vasper explained, had one of the finest of new minds, and was engaged in sinking shafts into the earth's core, to obtain heat for Taval. As for Jim, he had taken up with a group of young fellows, all of athletic build, and all, strangely enough, imported in recent months. Jim mentioned a boxer, who fought in England while Jackson was President; of a runner who broke the mile record in 1995, and of an Olympic star winning his awards at the turn of the Twenty First century. It amused Bob that Jim appeared to fit in so quickly. Already, by one means or other, Jim actually had organized a baseball team, and was considering bowling. "Too bad they ain't got race horses," he complained to his friend. "They tell me there's one section, south of Taval, that's clean given over to cows and hogs and horses. Funny."

"Heard anything about your duties?" Bob inquired.

"Nope. Got hauled up before your friend Fator the other day. He just asked me if I enjoyed my meals, and minded taking part in the sports. Asked if I'd ever been sick, or had any ailments, and they typed my blood, and a lot of other things."

At Bob's look, Jim laughed, shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, they're doing the same thing to the other fellows. And say, Bob. Soon as I get acclimated, Vasper says, they want me to live at the stadium, with the other beef eaters."

Bob didn't know why, but he had a premonition then, of some menace directed at Jim and his friends. But he was about to be taken to his group, and Bob felt a growing excitement at the prospect. He

couldn't help that, for Taval, scientifically speaking, was a treasure house for any man of Bob's type. Vasper told him he should feel proud, in that he was the only newcomer, other than an actual native of Taval, to join this advanced group.

The day Bob heard Fator's voice over the headphones, summoning him to face the screen, Bob's pulse was racing. Fator did him the honor of standing before his desk as he spoke. "I am addressing the other members of the advanced group," he said. "Winslow is to join you now. Instruct him faithfully, and remember he has so much to study, before he can be of value to you, and Taval. Come forward, Winslow, and join your group."

As Fator vanished, Bob turned, gripped Vasper's hand. The latter looked sad. "Now I must go back—for another," he whispered. "Good luck—Bob."

He was due for a surprise, to find the advanced group atop the great dome, living in translucent quarters, a mile above Taval. There he met Kalen and Forg, the two scientists in charge. He was shown the rayscopes, that literally crawled along light waves, to annihilate time and bring before the human eye universes a billion light years away. There too, he studied the black wastes of Peltior Dark, and saw the spectograms that revealed the choking gas areas through which they must pass.

THERE was so much to learn, so much already learned, that Bob Winslow forgot ordinary hours. The phonetic language wasn't difficult. He spent his allotted hours in the library, and both Forg and Kalen, men high in years, yet with agile minds were patient in revealing discoveries some of them already centuries old. They told him that the entire universe would suffer, and they were gambling upon a chance to survive such intense cold passing through Peltior Dark, that the atmosphere would thaw inside five centuries. After that, they had concluded, provided there were no changes in the solar system, the sun would resume its natural sphere.

"Is there a way of traveling ahead as I have come," Bob asked. "So that we might learn our fate?"

Forg looked at Bob thoughtfully. "We have been afraid—of utter destruction," he

said finally. "In that case, we could not return. But if someone bold enough to make the venture tried it—" He broke off. Bob knew Forg was thinking of him. All right, he concluded. And even then, the germ of an idea was born in his mind.

At the end of the first month, Fator summoned him again. He was pleased with Bob's progress. It was even more than they had expected. He asked about Bob's health, then smiled. "I believe a rest period would benefit you," he said. "You may find your friend Kenley and spend five days—as you wish."

"Could Vasper share the rest period with me?" Bob inquired.

"Yes. I shall advise him. He has been back to your century. He delayed, for your benefit. You shall learn, upon seeing him."

Vasper had brought back two more young men. Likewise, he had some magazines and newspapers. He delivered these in Jim's presence and the latter grabbed for the sports pages. Bob picked up his choice paper. There was a headline, and pictures.

THREE DEAD, 47 HURT IN TORNADO

Bob saw pictures of twisted buildings, wreckage, littering streets. The entire downtown section of his home city had suffered. Kerla Research structures had been particularly hard hit. And there, at the bottom of the page, was his own photograph.

YOUNG DIRECTOR OF KERLA RESEARCH LOST, read the caption.

Many bodies were still buried in debris, Bob read, and it was assumed Bob had met such a fate. Jim interrupted. "Sa-a-ay. The Cincy Reds are coming right back. Can you tie that? And the Cards—sa-a-ay. The Nationals will be all tied up again this year. And—" Jim crushed the paper, tossed it away. He got up, face pale.

Bob laid his paper aside, walked over and patted Jim's shoulder. "They said it was a tornado, just as we got kidnaped, Jim. I'm supposed to be killed. And maybe you. We'll have to forget it, Jim."

"I wish to hell Vasper hadn't stopped on his way back. Or—that's the particular hell of it. Vasper going back. And coming just like coming home on the bus. And look at us. Look at us. Now I want to get back. Back home. To hell with this—all of it."

"Hush Jim. Shut up." Vasper looked sorry. He shook his head. "I thought I was doing you a favor," he apologized. "To tell the truth, I had never seen such a storm, and I wanted to know how—how intense it was myself. We—we almost gave up taking you back because of the disturbance."

"I wish it had blown you to the year 50,000," Jim said bitterly. "Now I'm thinking of Yanks and Reds and Cubs, and football and racing, and—of everything."

Vasper removed his headgear as Jim sauntered into another room. He motioned for Bob to do the same thing. In wonder, Bob obeyed. Watching the screen constantly, Vasper drew nearer. "Did you hear—whispers?" he asked anxiously. Bob shook his head.

Vasper hesitated. Then, "I like your friend Jim. Many young men do. But he is doomed."

"What!"

"Not so loud," Vasper said in lower tones. "Jim Kenley is doomed, unless some way is found. The young men are afraid, as more like Jim—with strong bodies and no great brains, are being brought here."

"Go on," Bob answered. "I betray no secrets. What do you mean?"

"Bodies are plentiful, but brains are not. Bodies can die, but brains must survive. The Three have decided that."

Ice raked across Bob's heart. "So what?"

"At last they know—how to transfer the mind from body to body. Now, do you understand?" Quickly Vasper slipped on his headgear. Bob imitated his action mechanically. They were not a moment too soon, for a figure passed across the screen, bearing an apparatus resembling a miniature camera. It vanished. Vasper nodded. "Room inspector. He records everything as he goes across the screen." And now Jim returned. Vasper suggested going outside. Bob remained in the room. He wanted to think.

VASPER had taken a real chance to get this information to him. Now he understood why Jim was removed to the stadium barracks. Taval's rulers had stumbled upon something, more important probably than all other findings. Brain trans-

ference! Old men gaining immortality! Young men doomed, to premature senility, then death! And Jim among them. Bob felt sick now.

There must be a way out. Bob felt his debt to Vasper, for undoubtedly the latter knew more than he had revealed. Now a chance remark of Forg's made recently bobbed up in Bob Winslow's mind. "We won't have to worry about leaving our work undone." That was what Forg had said. It tied in with another comment by one of the advance group, who vouchsafed the information to Bob that there would be few additions to their division.

Jim returned at that moment. He started talking about organizing two baseball nines. "Calling 'em the Yanks and Cubs," he laughed. "Say Vasper—where you going?"

Vasper had been listening intently, obviously to a message over his headphone. He whirled, raced toward the screen and vanished. "Can you tie that," Jim exclaimed. "He's a funny duck. But a good scout, Bob. I mean, like us. He—"

Two men materialized on the screen. They stepped into the room. Addressing Jim, one, a swarthy, wide-shouldered man spoke. "You are to come with us."

"Me? I'm suppose to be on leave."

"I had permission for him to join me," Bob put in.

The swarthy one looked at Bob. "I have orders," he said slowly.

Jim swore, looked thoughtful, then shrugged his shoulders. "In this place, they don't fool with you," he mused. "Okay. See you later, Bob."

Panic gripped Bob. Vasper hadn't skipped out because of his own orders. Somebody had tipped him off. "Wait a minute," he addressed the men. "Maybe I can straighten this out. Fator—"

"We are under Fator's orders."

Jim looked pale. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Bob. I know more than you thought. See you later—if you won't recognize me—"

For quite a while Bob Winslow paced the room like a caged animal. Jim did know something. Maybe Vasper had told him, too. Maybe a lot of young men in Taval were whispering the dread news around, helpless yet, hoping for some sort of break to check this menace. It was some time later when Vasper entered the room,

caught Bob's eyes with a motion for silence, beckoning him at the same time. Curious, Bob came to him. Vasper held out his hand, pointing to the screen.

They entered a small room, not well lighted. It had no occupants. That is, not till Vasper removed his headgear, as did Bob. The room had a false front, painted to resemble walls and furnishings. Two young men were in the semi darkness behind the false wall.

"Godi and Lelan," Vasper whispered. "They have arranged this room, once a guard room and forgotten. They have knowledge."

"About what? Why they came for Jim?"

"Yes," said the one known as Godi. "Lelan and I are sons of men near The Three. We know Fator has learned brain transference and plans to experiment, first with Forg, of your own group."

"When?"

"Within the hour. That is why he sent for Jim Kenley."

Bob looked at the three, all sober faced, rebellious. "You like Jim," he suggested.

"He is—swell," Godi put in. "That is his word for things he likes. Fator has no right to take any of our bodies, for housing brains of old men."

"But we are helpless," Lelan sighed. "Godi and I, like others born of Taval families, are safe. But the Jim Kenleys brought out of time—they must suffer. It is not right. When I am old I am ready to die."

Vasper nodded. "I do not want to go back, and take men of my age, for such purposes. It's murder, no less. We do not believe in murder, here in Taval."

Fator! He had appeared so benevolent. He was a brilliant man. Bob could understand in a way. Fator was ambitious for his period of stewardship, to reach all the goals he had set. And he could live himself, through his brain, till he had gained those objectives. And Forg! Jim's body and Forg's brain, toiling at his own side in the years to come. Bob shuddered. But what to do? If the experiment was so nearly at hand—

YES, there was a chance. It came to Bob in a wave of inspiration. It was a chance that had about as long odds as his own at returning to 1940. The single,

time-space transfer machine! If it could be called a machine. Vasper should know of it. He had made so many trips. Now he met his Taval friend's troubled eyes. "The machine," he whispered.

Vasper looked scared. "No. One dies attempting to even touch it, except at Fator's orders. It is a sacred trust of a hundred men. To try and reach it means you would be exploded, into sheer gas."

"But if Fator gave an order," Bob went on, "what then?"

Vasper shrugged his shoulders. "Obedience, of course. But Fator will not give such an order."

Godi plucked Bob's arm. "I think I understand," he spoke quietly. "If such an order was given. In Fator's place, I mean. Then one would die, but perhaps you could gain the machine."

"True, Godi. But the only little item lacking, is how to give that order, and then keep Fator from canceling it."

"I think I could attend to that," Lelan put in. "My duties are in the rooms of The Three. I know that the other two are sick old men, and Fator alone directs us. I know his directing room, from where all his orders originate. In fact, I go in and out at will, because I am responsible for all equipment."

Bob looked at Vasper. "Where would this experiment be held—Forg's, and Jim—"

"I do not know, unless it be in Fator's rooms. Again, it might be somewhere else. Fator has a secret workroom."

Bob sank to a stool, mind going over the picture. Presently he looked up at Lelan. "If we left here at precisely the same moment, you to the directing room, Vasper and I to where I could be near the time-space transfer machine, I'm willing to, well, make a try and get in the machine. But Vasper, or someone must tell me what to do."

"That is impossible," Vasper told him. "However I can operate everything. Win-slow, I wish to go with you and Jim. Back to your 1940."

"But they'd come and get us—I mean you in particular."

Vasper smiled. "There is one way, my friend, they cannot reach us. We keep the machine. But before that, we take Fator along, to drop into another time. Then

there will be no brains transferred, and there will be no new machine, for many, many years. I know. This one took fifty years of construction."

"We might fail," Bob muttered. He looked at Godi and Lelan. Godi spoke up. "I have heard whispers of Fator's secret workroom. Maybe I can find it, if you fail otherwise. I leave now." He turned, pressed Lelan's hand. "We do this for Jim Kenley, one—one swell sportsman," he said, then hurried around the false wall.

THEY stood there for minutes, the remaining three, whispering final details, Bob felt alternate hot and cold chills now, as he realized his own end, should they fail. Or Lelan fail. Lelan assured them he would not fail. "You shall have the orders before the count of ten," he swore. "The guard will fall back and admit you."

They walked around the false wall, toward the screen. Then the trio stiffened. A room inspector, his tiny apparatus turned their way, was visible. Now he entered boldly. "What's this," he demanded. "This place—you three—unauthorized here!" He pressed the side of his apparatus and a pale light flickered. Vasper and Lelan leaped together, struck the room inspector, all three crashing to the floor. Vasper got up first. He snatched a plastic chair, brought it down on the man's head. Lelan was jumping up and down. "The alarm's given. We've got seconds, at the most. Now—now—we've got a chance—"

Lelan went through the screen first. Then Vasper grasped Bob's hand. "Just go with me," he cried. "Don't think where you're headed." They came into a large, domed structure, and Bob saw it—the golden hued, snubnosed machine, looking more like a submarine than anything else. Guards were tumbling out of screens. They bore slender, black wands. But already Bob knew those wands could blast any known substance, at almost any distance. The men formed a circle about the machine, and wands were leveled at the pair. "If Lelan fails—we're gone," Vasper cried. "They have orders to kill—anyone. Unless the word comes."

They were a hundred feet from the machine, before the largest screen. It was hopeless to rush the men. For even if Vasper could get inside the machine, they

would be gas instead of humans before sprinting twenty feet. It was tempting to wheel and dash back through the screen. And yet the alarm surely was out now, and it wouldn't take long to identify the guilty. Then it was that Vasper cried out. "Look. They've made no move. They have the order from Lelan."

Not a guard moved, true, but the wands were still leveled. And now Vasper strode forward. Bob's knees felt weak, but he followed. Panic was upon him, so much that he felt an almost overwhelming urge to dash for the machine. As for Vasper, he spoke no word. It was evident the guards were dumbfounded, still suspicious, but powerless for the moment to halt them. And Vasper reached up, moved a hand and a door slid open. The pair entered.

Already the men outside were in motion. As one a half hundred rushed toward the door. But Vasper had it closed. "Lelan's in trouble," he called, running forward to a turret. "Hang on. We're going to Fator's quarters—to his entrance hall."

THE domed ceiling melted. In one continuous motion they seemed to blend into another building, beneath another dome, more brightly lighted. There were men, guards, but Vasper groaned. "Fator is not here," he shouted.

Bob was conscious of a voice sounding in his earphone. It was high pitched, insistent. "Tell Vasper—my legs are gone. Fator—Stadium—underneath—" Lelan's voice died in a great sigh. Bob pictured the onrush of guards, blasting their friend's body bit by bit into gas. Bob shouted the words to Vasper, who nodded. They made the arena field first, and there was Godi, racing toward them and pointing toward the tower overlooking the stadium entrance. Then Godi reached the tower, pointed downward.

Even as Godi pointed vigorously into the earth, he seemed to swell, to grow abruptly, into a white cloud that became mist. Guards were coming across the field. Vasper circled the machine above the dissolving mist. Then, with an air of decision, he pointed the machine earthward.

This was no sudden transition by means of fourth-dimensional powers. The machine struck, and they became the center of an exploding mass of soil and masonry.

And as quickly, they dived into a great, underground chamber.

There, visible to the invaders, was Fator. There were two beds, side by side. One held Jim Kenley, bared to the waist. Forg was stretched upon the other. Fator had his hands upraised, and Vasper got down, ran to the exit and waved his hand. "You take Fator. I'll take care of Jim," he called. Bob was outside as quickly. He realized the chance they must take now. Let the screens pour in a horde of guards and the machine's security for them would vanish. Fator was fumbling for a wand. It had fallen to the floor. Now Fator was bent over, hand outstretched. Bob made a dive. He struck the director of Taval, sent him beyond reach.

Vasper was racing toward the machine with Jim's body. Forg made feeble efforts to raise as Bob, the death wand in his possession, grabbed Fator's arm. "Get up," he snarled. "You kill no buddy of mine, for his body. Get up, or I'll blow you out of Taval."

Fator wasn't calm now. He looked wolfish, screaming curses, clawing for the wand. He resisted, and Bob started dragging him. And now men did pour forth from screens, wands before them. "Blast him," Fator shouted. "Quick—"

Bob yanked Fator around, holding him as a screen. He held the wand before him. "Okay," he said. "Let's start."

It was a bluff. Vasper shouted encouragement. But Fator fought, and almost pulled away, while guards circled at a safe distance, hesitating to attack. They followed, till Bob was below the machine entrance. It was a three-foot climb, and Fator himself laughed. "When he turns to push me in, use the ray," he ordered.

Bob stood there. He was stymied. He heard Vasper talking. He must be talking to Jim. Then Bob felt a hand. "Jim's coming around," he said. "Hold tight when we pull." Hands slid under both shoulders. Fator let out a scream of sheer terror now, and both Jim and Vasper tugged. Guards ran toward them. Vasper calmly snatched Bob's wand. He made a quick flip and the room became a cloud of white mist. Then, as he and Jim pulled Bob and Fator inside, Vasper closed the door and jumped for the control turret. Fator was still struggling, but Bob and Jim

held to him, as Vasper directed. Up through the earth they roared and the stadium field was in bold relief, for one brief moment. It was Bob's last glimpse of Taval. For the roaring increased, and the ports admitted a nightmare of flashing, ever-changing lights, coupled with deepest darkness. Then the roaring stopped. The lights slowed. Motion ceased; Vasper climbed down, stared at Fator thoughtfully. "Your brain can hunt a body—in the Sixth Century," he said.

BOB saw green fields, the ocean in the distance, blue and dotted with sails. They were atop a hill, and vineyards stretched downward, to a city at the water's edge. Fator stared, then nodded. "I was too ambitious," he sighed. "Too ambitious." He stepped down, without a backward look. Vasper closed the door, and when he reached the controls, the roaring, and the succession of shifting colored lights, like tinted lightning, recommenced. Bob had no idea how long it took them. Jim, looking pale, suddenly woke up fully. "Gosh," he shouted. "I wish we could go back, for a while," he called.

"Why?" Bob wanted to know.

"Why—right away my Yanks and Cubs were to tangle for a five-game series, and Lelan's to pitch for the Cubs."

Bob looked at Vasper, who smiled sadly, shook his head. Bob didn't explain what had happened to Lelan, who had given his life for this friend from the Twentieth Century. Then the machine jolted to earth. It was night outside. Vasper opened the door, extended his hand. "That glow is your home city," he said. "You have been away exactly sixty-one days, my friends. Perhaps you can explain that both were taken to hospitals out of the city during the excitement, after the great storm, and your identities were lost, due to great stress."

Bob nodded. "Yes, that can be explained. We'll arrange that, Vasper. But now, the problem is—well, you. Come and live with us. We'll make it up, for all this."

But Vasper shook his head. "No. I would be difficult to explain, perhaps. Or at least, my conveyance, eh?" He smiled.

"But you can't go back to Taval," Jim protested. "You've broken a half dozen

laws, and swiped their precious machine."

"True. I doubt I could ever return," Vasper affirmed. He sighed. "I've been something I regret now. Very much. But life has its compensations, Bob and Jim. Perhaps I would have kept right on, kidnapping, as you say, to bolster up our civilization. But Fator's discovery—that made the difference. It is possible there might be a revolt in Taval. I can discover that, by visiting a later time than the year 3300. Meanwhile," he added, "there are some many periods of our history I want to investigate. From the beginning. Think of that. The stone age. The ice ages. When the world was young. I can go when and where I please, right on down the ages. What a story I could dictate, when I grow old."

"You make me want to join you," Bob muttered. But he already felt a curiosity about Kerla Research, and the rebuilding. He could think of a particular restaurant, and of shows, and people he wanted to talk with again. Jim put it into words. "Boy—oh-boy. Shows. Who won the Belmont. And they're thinking of the Series—and football. And all the gang—they'll want to know where I recovered, huh. And my folks—" Jim's voice broke. As for Vasper, he put an arm about Jim's shoulder. Then he came over, pressed Bob's hand. "Maybe," he smiled, "I might visit you, some time, and take you for—well a sort of leave. If you care."

"Care! I'll make it my vacation this same time next year. For a month. We'll go back—and forward too. And Jim—"

"You're wrong there," Jim said flatly. "I'll entertain Vasper here, in good old 1940, or 45. But I'm not leaving this place, unless," he added, "I can run up ahead six months some time, and get the series and Bowl game results. You know, just for luck."

And that was that. Vasper reentered the golden tinted machine. They could see him, silver headgear gleaming, through the turret plastic hood. He waved a hand. Then a roar, and the machine was gone.

Below, lights of a row of cars marked a highway. Bob and Jim, both silent, trudged down the hill, toward the highway. Once more they must live where time and space counted very much indeed.



The Forbidden Dream

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE



DL

The Forbidden Dream

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

Ganymede was an outcast world—a fallen Titan. But deep in the brain of her empire-conscious race was the formula of a cataclysmic weapon that would one day smash the universe.

I SLIPPED through space in a one-man rocket, scarcely comprehending the stars about me, and yet, two months before, I had been a well-informed scientist! Now, suddenly, in my thirty-first year, I was entirely stripped of the precious scientific knowledge for which I had studied through fifteen years in a half-dozen colleges on a half-dozen planets!

Nothing remained but the instincts, acquired traits, and a layman's knowledge of the universe.

Incomprehensible—yes. But true.

Two months before, I was called into the presence of my employer, the president of the Tellurian Science Research Institution, and had been waved to a seat opposite him.

"Sid," he said worriedly, "war is about to break out between Earth and Jupiter. I guess you know the reason, but I'll review it. From no one knows where, a large piece of radium floated into the solar system. Naturally, every planet wanted it, and we were lucky enough to get it. The other planets took it with good grace—except Jupiter.

"Now she's mad at us, and three or four months will bring war. Nobody will win, but both will lose—heavily. The whole thing will be quite senseless. Now if we had a weapon superior to any now known, Jupiter wouldn't dare attack us.

"There is only one such weapon of which we know, and it is not in material form. It is locked up in the minds of a people who live on Jupiter's third satellite, Ganymede."

He surveyed me quietly. "You've heard of that, I suppose, though it's hardly more than a legend.

"Thousands of years ago the natives of Ganymede held sway over a large empire—an empire which embraced, historians say, all the major planets, and the larger asteroids. Today the race is almost ex-

ting. Fifty of its members remain, and they live on Ganymede.

"In the past, no way has been found to secure the secret. If it were in our possession now it would prove invaluable.

"Now, however, a means has been found. You are aware that, ever since interplanetary travel became an established thing, people realized it would be impossible to live on or visit worlds of which they were not native due to differing gravities and atmospheric pressures, and the quality of the atmosphere itself.

"A genius discovered the only way out by inventing a complex machine which is used on every planet where there is intelligent life. The idea underlying its invention was not to use your own body, but a body native to the world in question. A large business has sprung up around this invention, and it is called Transmitted Egos, Inc.

"The Ganymedans run a branch, of course—they are compelled to do so, under planetary law. Offhand, you'd think that it would be simple to just rent a body, pay the additional charge for retaining instincts, acquired traits and learning, and then ferret that mind's secret from it. Not so. Obviously only a skilled scientist *could* read that secret; so the Ganymedans have a test in which they read your mind itself. If you're a scientist, they'll only give you the instincts. If you're not a scientist, you can use everything, for you won't be able to translate the secret even if you're aware of its existence."

I interrupted. "But that lets me out. They'll discover at once that I'm a scientist, and will refuse to give me anything but instincts."

"You won't be a scientist much longer," the chief smiled. "We're going to drain from you practically every bit of scientific knowledge you possess."

"Spin the rest of it," I told him, a sinking feeling in my heart.

"You'll be able to pass the test the Gany-medans give you, and the results will be negative. You'll receive the entire mind, minus a slice of consciousness necessary to keep your own body alive. But in your ignorant state, you won't be able to decipher the secret.

"In order that you can, I will have sent a layman, probably your own friend, Will Carrist, to the moon beforehand, and with him will go the record of your learning. You will go to the moon, and on the pretense of having made a date with him there, meet him. He will assist in transferring your learning back to you; then you will be able to understand the secret Ganymede guards so zealously. You then return to the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, and come back to Earth. It's that simple."

"Any danger from Jupiter itself?"

"A condition of war will not manifest itself for some months. There will be no danger from that source."

"No other catches?"

"None—provided you are careful."

IT had been done as he said, and now I was a layman, hardly knowing the basic principle under which the rocket I rode drove me through space.

I landed on Ganymede, a bleak little moon about 3,550 miles in diameter, and a light surface gravity.

Although Ganymede is almost half as large as Earth, the horizon appears to slope away swiftly. To my right I could just see Jupiter, striped with broad bands. She filled almost an entire quarter section of the sky, and the lower half of her was eclipsed by her moon—that is, she was just setting. On the left the sun, a coppery disk the apparent size of a dime, was just rising. There was no night on Ganymede at this time of its short year—which was seven days, three hours and forty-two minutes long; most of the time there was just a pale, hazy sort of twilight.

I landed in front of the Bureau of Transmitted Egos about 4 p.m. Earth time. I selected the heaviest helmet I could find, and donned heavy metal shoes. In this manner I increased my weight to about three-quarters normal.

I pushed open the door of the domed

building, and strode in. No one was about. There was a bell hanging from a rope, and I clanged on it impatiently with the little hammer, and waited. It seemed that very little business came to this uninteresting little sphere, containing as it did only fifty inhabitants and one ruined city.

I gave the bell another blow, and heard motion from the adjoining room. A little, wizened old man, with hooked nose, great ears, short limbs, gigantic chest and leathery skin, entered. Less than three feet in height, he stood staring rudely up at me until I feigned impatience, though what I felt was uneasiness.

"Come, man!" I shouted in the universal tongue. "I can't stand here all day! I want a transferrall To your business!"

He mumbled something or other, but the thick helmet and thin air between my ears and his voice did not enable me to catch the words.

He stood behind his desk and started shouting at me.

"What's your profession?"

"I'm a psychologist," I told him. "I've come here to write a chapter of my book, 'Psychology of Races.' For that reason I wish to use as much of the mind as you find it possible to give me!"

He surveyed me distastefully. "Are you a scientist?"

"No," I quite truthfully answered. "By Lord, quick about it! I've got an appointment with a friend that arrived here some days ago."

He pushed a blank toward me. "Fill this out."

When I had finished, he took the blank and beckoned me into a room.

A peculiar machine stood in a corner, but with my layman's mind I could make nothing of it.

The gnarled gnome beckoned again.

"You men of the other planets," he said, without any pretense at politeness, "are all liars. How do I know you're not a scientist? You have to take the test, otherwise you don't get anything but the instincts."

"Well, I'm willing," I told him with a sneer. "I've heard of you Ganymedans. You guard your secrets well. Don't be afraid; I won't steal them."

"Into the chair," he snapped.

I sat in a chair attached with various wires to the contrivance behind me. These

Ganymedans certainly did not pay tribute to the niceties of politeness. He jerked off my helmet, leaving me gasping. I lost my temper but before I could make up my mind to hit him he had clamped another down on my head.

"Gas will come through that helmet in a moment," he snapped. "Breathe deep; I can't have any mental resistance."

I had never taken the test before, and wasn't at all sure what would happen. I started to get up, but at that same instant the gas hit my nostrils. It carried me away like a leaf on a spring wind.

THE next thing I knew I was still sitting in that chair, breathing in pure oxygen from my own helmet. The old Ganymedan was standing before me.

"You are," he said contemptuously, "as ignorant as a dog. Your book will never sell!"

He hobbled away, and I followed. I entered a vast room, the walls of which were covered with involved, inter-connected mechanical contrivances. It required the operation of this entire machine to transfer personalities between two bodies.

The Ganymedan, grumbling still, pointed to a metal chair which, with its snaky wires and cables twisting away from it, reminded me most forcefully of one of those devices used centuries ago to eliminate dangerous criminal talent from the world. I seated myself.

The old man then struck a large gong above his desk. He used a measured cadence which at the moment made me think that it might be some sort of code he was using. I later learned, to my peril, that such was the case. The clanging sounds echoed and re-echoed in that room, and fled from the building out into the thin air of Ganymede, reaching, presumably, to the ruined city wherein lived this moon's fifty inhabitants.

"A few moments," he said in his crackling voice. "They will hear that bell, and one of them will come to transfer with you. The charges will amount to 1500 univers. That includes taxes."

1500 univers: 2000 dollars.

"And," he resumed, "if the body is injured fatally you must consider your own body forfeit, and all your possessions will

revert to us—to be divided equally among the inhabitants of Ganymede. That is planetary law."

He spoke these words in a kind of hiss, and his eyes shone with a deadly light that for a moment made me feel cold. At that time I did not know the reason for this strange exhibition, but later, when I had possession of my temporary body and most of its mind, I knew it quite fully. Death is the most dreaded of all things on Ganymede. And the people who live on it have quite a logical reason for it, too, considering their terribly depleted numbers.

"I understand that," I told him. "Let's get to the business quickly. And don't forget I wish to retain the entire mind."

His eyes narrowed, and suspiciousness flooded his face.

"You seem over-anxious," he said through tightened lips.

I snorted in derision, but secretly cursed myself. I had certainly been more insistent in my demands than necessity demanded.

"You're a fool," I taunted. "I am a psychologist. That should be sufficient reason. Curse it, where is that fellow?" I snapped angrily.

He turned away, mumbling, while I feigned irate impatience. He came back and started connecting wires to a sort of metal harness which he draped about me. He then went about snapping switches that soon had the whole room lit up with sparkles and flashes that presented an eerie display. I felt an awe at these machines, even though, two months before, I could have built duplicates of them without resorting to the use of blueprints.

A back door opened and a wiry little fellow, a newer edition of the old man, came in and for a moment stared at me with insolent, hating eyes. I returned the stare. It fascinated me to know that this, in a few minutes, would be my body.

THE young Ganymedan hopped into his place, and his older counterpart threw the metal harness over him and connected it with the machine. He then took up a position at his control board, and I saw great cables tense like garden hose as a load of power went through them. In the ordinary sense of the word I did not lose consciousness, but saw the

whole proceedings. There was a ringing in my head that droned up and down. I stiffened, and felt tiny forces plucking at my consciousness, forces that changed my very mind into vibrations that sped along metal cables, finally impinging on the brain of the body I was to occupy, there translating themselves back into actual brain stuff.

I then experienced the most peculiar sensation in the universe—that of being in two different places at the same time. I saw myself sitting in that sinister chair through the eyes of the dwarf, and simultaneously saw the dwarf through my own eyes.

It made one feel cold and crazy, for my consciousness was swiftly oozing out of my mind into his, and a proportionately smaller amount of his was oozing into mine.

This went on for some moments, occupying a stretch of time that appeared like eternity. I felt like yelling. The sensation was too eery to describe logically in words.

I knew the transmission would be completed shortly when I saw the body of the dwarf fade from my sight, and my own gain lasting prominence. . . . I soon knew, beyond doubt, that the transferral had been accomplished.

I looked across the room at my face, a cold chill racing like a comet up and down my back. My features had relaxed from the keenness which I fondly imagined had been its outstanding characteristic into an expression of dull, idiotic apathy. I doubt if that body of mine even knew it was alive, for the small bit of the dwarf's consciousness which it possessed did not have sufficient power to tell it so.

Except for the lack of this tiny section of consciousness, I was a complete and actual dual personality, with the exception that my own ego could not be supplanted in the least measure by that of the dwarf. At once I became fully enlightened on the customs and history of this race, and knew at once all remembered details of the ancient city in which its remnants lived. I knew at once that strange, old language they used amongst themselves, and felt, for one instant, the morbid hate which the race entertained for beings other than members of that race.

I was more interested in that corner of the mind which refused to be explored. It was as if cloudy veils were stretched there, and through that layer of veils I could glimpse shadowy visions of a complicated mechanism which defied all my efforts to focus its details. This much alone could I grasp: its powers of destruction were terrible.

THE harness was removed from about me, and I jumped from the chair with the spryness of a monkey, stumbling clumsily as I did so.

The old fellow fairly boiled. "You be careful!" he snarled at me, his eyes glittering. "The body is not yours! Remember, you will make a heavy reparation if it is injured fatally! That's law!"

"Calm yourself," I said to him, in my new, crackling voice. "This measly body will not die!"

"Now," I continued, "to the business of payment, and a receipt."

The Ganymedan glared frostily, but paid me no immediate attention. He unfastened my body from its place, and roughly, vengefully, led it across the room and into another. I followed, remembering that one always watched his body being shelved.

Although I had gone through this experience before on other planets, I must confess that each additional body transferral always made me feel strange and unreal. That was my body the old Ganymedan was leading away, and it did not seem comprehensible.

The room in which I now found myself was small, and lined with shelves with sliding glass doors. Within each small compartment was a machine which regulated the air pressure and humidity, and even the quality of the air itself.

I helped the wrinkled gnome lift my body to its shelf, saw him unsnap my helmet, and let it hang loose. I then rifled my pockets of money, and other sundry articles, and handed the station master 1500 univers. He stuffed it in his large, sack-like pockets, and regulated the air machine, afterward snapping the glass door.

I looked about the room in the meantime, and found, on a shelf adjacent to mine, Will Carrist's body. He had arrived, then, and had made a safe transferral. I watched with fascination the slow,

rhythmic rise and fall of his heavy chest.

The old man then wrote out a slip in triplicate, and signed all three. One he gave to me, another he pasted on the glass case wherein lay my peculiarly beastial-looking body. The other he stuck in his pocket, from which it would be stuck into the corporation's files.

Everything completed to my satisfaction, I turned and walked away, out the door and into Ganymede's thin atmosphere. However, I experienced no discomfort, having as I did a body quite used to conditions on this world.

I followed an ill-defined road, but my eyes, accustomed to the half-light which obtains on this planet, felt no difficulty in picking it out. It twisted and twined for probably a mile, finally leading me into the city proper, a great ruins containing the remains of monster edifices, pierced in hundreds of places with unlit, glassless windows. A sense of desolation brooded here like a living thing. This was the only city left from the great revolution which had reduced the once great race of Ganymede to its meager fifty inhabitants, who, like rats, lived in whatever shelter they could squeeze themselves.

I WENT directly to the house of my accomplice, knowing its location quite well, for every inhabitant of this strangely populated world knew it.

It was not much; merely a stone hovel with a stream of heavily mineralized water running through it. I knocked on the door, and then pushed it open.

I knew quite well that that was Carrist there reading, for my Ganymedan's brain told me so. However, he could not know it was I standing there, and this was borne out by the fact that he only stared, showing no sign of recognition.

However, we had had to arrange some sort of signal before either of us left Earth, and that signal had been to whistle a few bars from Indsa Bindsa, an operetta which had run on Mars for two of its years, and now threatened to run a full ten years on Earth.

I pursed my lips, or rather tried to purse my lips. I couldn't do it! I stared open-mouthed, while Carrist sat there looking at me, a bewildered expression on his face. Then I knew. Ganymedans can't

whistle! Their lips cannot form themselves into a shape necessary to accomplish it.

For a moment I was at a loss, but then I opened my mouth and sang it. I sounded as if someone had rattled a sheaf of yellowing papers. However, Carrist got the drift, and jumped to his feet, as if someone had dropped a match into a can of explosive; rather, he jumped to the feet of the body he was using.

"Sid, by Lord!" he cried, thrusting forth a hand which I shook. "It's like seeing an angel in hell! It's been hell! Not a damned thing to do! Don't tell me you couldn't have hurried it up?"

I slapped him affectionately on the back. Although Carrist was as ignorant and untaught as a dog, he was probably my best friend, and he was serving Earth well in his present role. "Cheer up," I said. "It was arranged that I shouldn't make it sooner than this. The boss didn't want to arouse unnecessary suspicions, and let me tell you that goose down there in the bureau is certainly suspicious. Well, how do you like your new body? Did it keep its teeth clean?"

"Hah!" he laughed. "I scrub myself daily, and have yet to glimpse the skin! Well, sit down, and tell me how it came off."

I sat. "Like a top," I told him. "I'm afraid I was a little insistent on getting what I wanted, but I suppose it's all right. Now, you. You got the machine and record in safely?"

He nodded. "Everything fine. Everything except the food. This is the rottenest place I've ever transferred to. There's not a hotel, not a decent place to sleep. Lord! I'll be glad to get away. It'll be soon?" he asked anxiously.

"Not too soon," I warned. "Look funny if I came and went in a single day. What if they gave me that infernal mind probing test as I went out?"

Carrist grimaced. "We'll hope against that. There's no use postponing the thing though. Let's get that record to work. Man, I'm jittery! These devils around here know I'm not one of them, and they hate me. You see it pouring out of their eyes. They're mad clean through. They're dreaming that some day they'll get that empire of theirs back. It's crazy! Why,

the whole race won't last another century. They're dying faster than they can propagate.

I nodded. "Ganymedans, as far back as history goes, have always been the most warlike race.

"It's a pity, in a way. Martial glory is their ideal, but it's too late. They haven't a chance. That's why my conscience doesn't hurt me. To leave their secret with them is to throw it away. I can just glimpse, but can't understand, a terrible weapon of destruction in this mind. Once I have completely mastered the details of its construction, I am certain the coming war can be averted."

"Then let's get at it," urged Carrist frantically. "Let's hurry it up, and get out of here. They won't suspect."

"No," I decided. "Not for a while. Remember, I'm supposed to be a psychologist, and I've got to take notes.

"Really, the race's psychology is quite interesting. This mind, at least, has a mental fixation concerning empire, empire, in big capital letters. And I suppose if this is a sample all the others are the same. They live, walk, and dream empire. It's bred into them from the time they are born. As soon as one of them can talk he is coached fully and completely in the secrets they are at such pains to keep."

Carrist shrugged impatiently. "To hell with their dreams and their fixations. I want to get back to Earth and I want my old reliable body that knows how its muscles are going to act. I've only the instincts, and I haven't learned how to control these damned bodies yet. I tell you, Sid, this thing is weighing me down!"

I laughed at him and yawned. I threw myself across the rude bed. "I'm going to get some sleep, Carrist. This fellow must have been to a night club for the past seven weeks. Good night."

Rather a futile term, considering that at this time of its short year there are no nights on Ganymede. I heard Carrist grumbling even as I went to sleep.

GANYMEDE has an axial rotation that takes up about thirty hours, and a year of a little over seven days. She had her summers, autumns, springs and winters the same as earth, save that they recurred more frequently. But it was only

when she was on Jupiter's other side, and away from the sun, that she had nights, and those nights were so cold as to almost approximate the temperature of outer space itself. And the days were but little warmer, since the heat received from the sun is negligible, and that from Jupiter more so, since that body has a temperature of minus two hundred degrees C. on the visible surface.

We passed one of these short years on Ganymede. During this time Carrist became more and more impatient, and since he had already passed a month of Earth time here I couldn't blame him. I insisted on staying, partly to make my visit seem authentic, and partly so I'd have enough time to write a convincing set of notes upon the racial psychology of these people.

However, he was only too glad to show me around.

Other races have always held a feeling of pity for the Ganymedans. Yet, in regard to material things, they are not to be pitied. They are the richest race in the solar system, and if they had not insisted on cherishing dreams which, in their hearts, they must have known as futile, and if the slowly coming death of their race had not been looming above them, they would have known complete happiness.

Their government, as might be expected, was anarchistic. They were such a closely unified people, with identical ambitions and hopes, that no other form would have worked as well.

Food was plentiful. They had vast fields of several different types of vegetables which grew rapidly, and needed not even the tiny amount of sunlight they received. There was a minimum of physical labor, since they possessed up-to-date, wholly automatic machinery.

They possessed television sets, a public library fed from book and magazine marts on the other planets. They possessed two or three ships of ancient design, which maintained constant commerce with the rest of the solar system, freighting vast supplies of food exports to the markets, where, being considered delicacies by the inhabitants of other worlds, they commanded fabulous prices.

As for religion, I doubt if they had one,

unless it were one centering about their dreams of empire.

Carrist willingly showed me about the city, and even walked with me to the vast agricultural fields. The city, in its prime, must have been huge. There were hundreds of old ruins, some of which were still standing, others of which had long since fallen to the parent earth. What with the strange twilight day through which a myriad stars could be seen burning fiercely, and the long, gloomy shadows cast over the city by the hordes of still standing edifices, oppression of the bluest nature gripped me on these tours.

The eyes of the Ganymedans always followed us, but never a word would they speak. And more than once we had the feeling that a certain Ganymedan continually trailed us. Had I attached to this discovery its true interpretation, we would have been saved the later peril into which my consequent cautionlessness led us. But I thought the trailer had been placed on our track merely as a matter of form, in which it is best to watch closely the leasae of a body.

IT was on the seventh and last day of our stay that Carrist, apparently, flung himself into an attitude of deliberate sulkiness, and refused to accompany me then or evermore.

"I'm sick of this place," he cried. "That old lady who cooks for us hates us. She's poisoning us! Did you ever taste such food?"

I had to tell Carrist he was crazy. It was the silliest thing imaginable to suppose that that old lady would deliberately poison the bodies of her own fellow Ganymedans. And yet, the food undoubtedly did taste rotten to Carrist, and I told him why. He possessed only the instincts of a Ganymede, and consequently he couldn't receive the sensation of taste through any mind but his own! I, on the other hand, tasted food, and used the mind of a Ganymedan in interpreting that taste. Had I used my own mind the food *would* have tasted rotten!

So Carrist refused to accompany me on the seventh day, and I went out alone, walking slowly down a broad refuse littered avenue. As usual, I had the sensation of being followed, but paid no atten-

tion save to turn leisurely and verify my suspicions. True to them, I saw a dwarf dart behind a huge block of stone that had fallen some centuries ago.

I continued on, and then suddenly noted that no Ganymedans, save the one behind me, appeared to be anywhere within the city.

I was pondering the reason for this, when I suddenly approached a building which was one of the few still standing. And I heard a voice from inside that spoke in tones of infinite tenderness, in tones as golden and mellow as a ray of sunshine in an alfalfa field; and the beauty of that voice made me stop stock still, and set my soul to shivering as if it were cold.

"Sons of Ganymede," came the caressing tones, "a day comes when we shall be as we were, when once again our millions shall hold sway over that vast empire our forbears founded.

"We shall be great, we shall be resplendent, and we shall grind under our heel those inferior races who now grind us under theirs. Oh, hated races, oh dogs who should, and shall, bow to us! Inferior races filled with the conceit of their fancied superiority! Sons of Ganymede," the voice rang out, "never forget, and never fear! We shall be great!

"You, sons of Ganymede, shall not know that power and glory," the tones suddenly sobbed out, "you shall not know the infinite grandeur of our race to come! But you shall be remembered and worshiped as those courageous ones who bore them, and caused them to live!

"Millions of years will pass," the rich, deep voice flowed on, "but Ganymede shall regain that which is rightfully hers. Resplendent sons of the universe, we shall be great!

"We are not lost," it resumed in compassionate tones. "We are treading again the path our forbears trod! Sons of Ganymede, we are great, we are mighty. Never forget; never forget!"

I found myself, at these words, dazed and enchanted, at the doorway of the hall from which had rung that hypnotizing voice. I stood there, not knowing how I had come there, looking down on an assemblage of Ganymedans who were sprawled out on rough stone floor, gazing with faces of pitable attention at the

speaker who was—a woman. I could not have called her beautiful by Earthly standards, but my Ganymedan's mind told me she was radiantly beautiful. She was ethereally divine, and she was the worshipped idol of every man on this world.

I WAITED, quivering, for more words to flow from that perfectly shaped mouth, but none came. But those words she had spoken, an insidiously wondrous music, were forever engraved on my brain, and would remain engraved on my brain even when I was transferred back to my real body. Suddenly I came to myself, for I suppose that for a while I had been using the brain of the Ganymedan in whose body my ego was incarcerated. A dwarf stood before me, shutting off the view of those people enchanted with the promise of a greatness to come that ran in their blood like strong wine.

He simply stood there, straight as an arrow, arms folded on his great chest, staring at me with vastly disdainful and dangerously glittering black eyes. He said no word, but I knew that I must go away.

I gave him no objections, for I felt dazed and bewildered, and I wanted to get away. For a last time I heard the voice; the sweetest music, and the most drugging, that I had ever heard on any planet. I turned and made my way, stumbling and blind, from the insidious words that flowed into the minds of those Ganymedans like a river into a sea, and whispered softly to myself the theme of a sermon which, while it probably would not have been more appropriate, was much more truthful.

"Dream on, oh sons of Ganymede," was its text, "and dreaming—die!"

I made my way back to the house, where I found Carrist sprawled out on the bed sleeping. Although I had been up but four hours, I threw myself down beside him.

Almost asleep, I heard the merest noise outside the door. I jumped up, suddenly in a consuming rage, and flung the door open. A Ganymedan stood there. We gave stare for stare. Then, exhibiting no embarrassment whatsoever, he turned his back on me, and walked away. I went back to sleep.

←Planet Stories—Summer

I awoke some hours later, and lay a while thinking. Then I dragged myself to my feet, and sat on the edge of the bed, a sudden, terrible shame flooding me, when I thought of my mission on this moon.

I finally reached over and slapped Carrist on the back. He awoke, sputtering angrily.

"That hurt!" he exclaimed.

"Why should you worry?" I asked. "It's not your body."

He gave me a scornful look, and I continued dully, "Set up your machine. I'm tired of my ignorant brain, and I'm sick to death of Ganymede."

I was not exactly sick to death of Ganymede, but it was the thought of those burning words I had heard a few hours ago that made me want to leave.

Carrist's face lit up joyously, and while he was rummaging a package out of the corner of the room, I set about completing my fake notes on racial psychology.

When I finished them, Carrist had the machine set, and a metal sphere, which, with its convolutions within convolutions, looked like a naked brain. And in actuality, it was a brain, containing as it did my entire store of scientific knowledge.

I LAY down on the bed, and Carrist fastened the headgear in place. He switched the machine on and a tiny pencil of visible vibration began to play on that artificial brain as it turned about in eccentric circles. I was even able to watch it, and saw those large grooves suddenly, as the transmitting vibration struck them, swell up as if there were some kind of pressure below them.

Gradually, over half a day, I regained my temporarily lost learning. How nicely I felt that knowledge of mine pouring back into me, how visibly I felt on this brain I was using the very pressure of thought impulses forming grooves that corresponded to them. Slowly I saw those shadowy veils being drawn aside, one by one, each detail of that strange death weapon being exposed to exploration, until, in a blinding flash, I suddenly knew what the weapon would do, and I almost shouted aloud. And before the day was over I knew all the details of its construction.

The sun was about two hours above the horizon when the "brain" was a smooth metal globe, milked dry. And I was my old, well informed self again.

I tore off the head-gear, and executed a Scotch dance, forgetting that but a few hours before I had been sunk into a self-damning lethargy, caused by the very fact that I was stealing from these people a weapon the secret of which held all their dreams of happiness to come. But now that I knew the secret, I was mad with delight.

Yes, I was mad. I forgot the incident of a day before, when I had surprised the eavesdropper, and I forgot that I had been trailed ever since I had received my temporary body.

"Carrist, I've got it!" I exulted. "A weapon, and what a weapon! Picture a death ray, inimical to all life. Yes, I know we've got death rays, but their range is less than ten miles! The range of this one is infinity itself!"

Had I been using my wits, I would have lowered my voice. I went on: "Its range is infinity, Carrist! It does not spread, it does not diffuse, even in an atmosphere! Furthermore, it propagates itself from cosmic radiation in its path!"

Carrist had been throwing me warning looks by the dozen, but by that time it was too late. I was about to go on, recounting the features of this resistless weapon, when Carrist gave a muffled oath, and leapt for the door, flinging it wide.

The breath congealed in my throat, and Carrist turned toward me, his face white as death. A gnome-like figure was running like mad away from the house, fast as its short legs would carry it.

For one second I stood paralyzed, and then, throwing regrets aside, leaving my fake notes behind me, and cursing myself dreadfully, I leapt through the door, in the wake of the dwarf. The fate of two planets—no, three—hung upon split seconds.

Carrist panted after me.

FEAR lent wings to my feet, and I dashed up the avenue, following the flying Ganymedan toward the Bureau of Transmitted Egos! But I knew then that I would never catch him. I swore bitterly. I might have known that the suspicions

I had sown in the mind of that old station master would result in something more concrete than suspicions.

However, it was impossible to turn back, for it would be worse to do that. I raced my gnome's body along the road, Carrist dropping behind, unused as he was to unfamiliar, unresponding tendons.

My mental fury at myself was unspeakable when I saw the eavesdropper reach the bureau and pop inside. I propelled myself with feet that acted like the exhaust of a rocket motor, but all the same, that lone Ganymedan reached the domed building a full two minutes before I did.

Then it was too late. He had gasped out his message to the station master, and that person had acted with the speed of a striking snake. In this emergency, he knew exactly what to do.

I entered the front entrance just as he disappeared into the next room, screaming like a demon from hell. I sprang across the room, panting, and sweat smeared. He had closed the door after him, but I sprang for it, little caring what havoc I wreaked on this body. The door splintered, and I fell into the room.

For a moment I couldn't move as I lay on the floor, and merely watched in dumb amazement what that Ganymedan was doing. He had slid the doors from the cases wherein reposed my and Carrist's body, and, with a strength that was superhuman, and could not have come to him under natural circumstances, he had dragged them to the floor, where he pummeled and kicked them from their stupor, screaming and shrieking out a horrible diatribe of sounds. Carrist's body jumped to its feet with an alacrity that sickened me. My own was more sluggish, but it knew quite well what to do!

For a moment I couldn't move. That was me, Sidney Hallmeyer, charging down on this body I was using. I jumped to my feet, quaking in terror. The monster bore down on me with saliva dripping from its jaws. It reached me, slapped me with an open hand and hurled me, bruised, into a corner.

Carrist came panting in behind me, his eyes wild. He saw the unnatural scene, but it raised no qualms in him. He felt not the slightest embarrassment at striking his own body.

FROM where I lay I saw him take a flying tackle and drag his own body to the floor, with a thump that shook the room, and rattled the glass doors on the shelves. Then he jumped to his feet, and took one second out to dispatch the eavesdropper with a terrible uppercut. He had, at least, good control over the muscles used in that blow.

He then flung himself headlong at his body again, bringing it to the floor twice before I collected my wits.

I threw myself at my own dull-witted body, fighting with a ferociousness governed only by desire to hurt it as little as possible. It was my body; I wanted to use it again. I leapt at it, trying to bring it to the floor, where I could render it slightly unconscious by striking it in the chin. But it man-handled me more than I harmed it.

Carrist, of course, had the harder time of it, for within the body that he was fighting was a mind that was three-quarters Ganymedan. It understood what was wanted of it, and why such was wanted; while mine merely fought, with a terrible, slow-moving lust to destroy.

But I suppose the odds were about the same for both Carrist and myself. Carrist's body fought the body he was using with a caution which clearly showed that he did not wish to hurt it any more than necessary. A broken limb, a gouged eye, would mean discomfort for life. And Carrist used that same caution; his aim was clearly to render his body unconscious with a clean blow.

However, my body was different. It was little more than a mindless *thing*; possessing a bit of consciousness which hardly told it that it was alive. It only wanted to tear and rend the body I was using limb from limb, and it did not realize that it would be its own body it was destroying.

While it had no sense of fair play, I was deluged with it. No kicks in the groin here; no gouging of eyes; no tearing at the ears. I am afraid that both Carrist and myself were putting the welfare of Earth below the welfare of our own bodies.

I am conscious now that each time I struck the six-foot body I mentally winced, as if from induced pain. But what I was thinking of was how those arms and legs of mine would feel when I once more

possessed my own familiar body.

I suddenly found myself with two antagonists, my body and the old Ganymedan, shrilly screaming. Of the two, my body was the greater menace. I took time out and with a side sweep of my arm I hurled the old fellow into a corner, where he lay, bruised and lifeless.

Then I darted at my huge opponent, and flung the full weight of my small body against it. We crashed backward, landing full tilt into one of the shelves. It came tumbling down on us, the crash of glass making a bedlam of noise. For a moment I lay stunned, while my body sluggishly arose, and looked stupidly about. Then, its eyes rested on me where I lay, and it staggered toward me, saliva dribbling from its opened lips. I staggered weakly to my feet, and once more the brute slapped me, and I fell again.

Carrist, at that moment, was just realizing that flying tackles were enervating him as much as his body. His lips suddenly twisted desperately, and he made a long dive at his antagonist, landed against its chest head on. Carrist's body fell like that of a brained ox. It lay there, writhing slightly, but unconscious. Carrist stared at it a moment, and then turned away, deathly ill. The sight was more than he could stand.

I DREW myself to my feet, and my body fell on me, hugging me in its monstrous embrace. I felt the air squeezed from my chest, and saw darting pin points of light go streaking before my eyes. I felt immensely tired, and wondered apathetically when the thing would end.

How I would have ended up I do not know had not Carrist ceased being sick and come to my rescue. He jumped on my body from behind, and dragged it to the floor, where it squirmed sluggishly for a moment, until I, gasping and hardly able to stand, went over, pushed the thing's helmet back, and punched it lightly in the jaw.

Carrist looked at me with a sick expression. He couldn't say a word.

I looked around. The old man was still lying there, like a wet rag. The eavesdropper was beginning to stir. Carrist went over, at my wave of the hand, and rendered him once more unconscious.

I grabbed the legs of Carrist's body, and motioned him to take the other end. Together we staggered across the central room and into the room which housed the vast ego transmitting machine. We left it there on the floor and ran back for my body. The old Ganymedan was still lying there.

We half dragged my body to the transmitting room, dropped it, and then put Carrist's body into its seat. I strapped the harness around it and made connections.

I fairly pushed Carrist into his place, and trussed him up tightly. I sprang over to the control board.

At that moment we both heard a sound that sent the blood racing up and down our spines in chills. There was a brazen clanging, a horrible cacophony of sound that lasted twenty seconds before I could move.

I dashed for the central room. At the desk was the station master, with his hammer in his hand, clanging at that bell with all his might, an intermittent beat that told me at once that he was signaling.

He saw me, but that did not stop him. He kept ringing that bell, and screaming out loud until I reached him and hit him alongside the head. He fell, but the inhabitants of this strange world had undoubtedly already heard his terrible clamor and had read the message aright.

My breath rattling in my throat I ran back into the room, and without a wasted movement pulled seven levers to neutral, and yelled out loud for Carrist to watch me. Fortunately, it was a much more complicated thing transferring personalities than placing them back into their proper bodies.

THE machine burst into life. Through hazing eyes I watched Carrist's real body, slowly saw the unconscious features take on their original sturdy, strong look. A pointer before me moved slowly down a scale. It reached zero. The reversal had been completed!

The body Carrist had been occupying was now its original self. It was tied tightly in the chair, and if black looks could have killed I would have died, and if screams had been pins I would have been a pin cushion.

I went over, struck him once, and then loosened him. He fell to the floor and I let him lie there.

I freed Carrist, his real body. He rose groggily, slumped against me. I realized with horror that he was still a bit unconscious from the very blow he had given himself!

I shook him, shouted at him, slapped him. His eyes opened, bewildered, and then a look of astonishment spread over his features. He laughed softly, and then helped me put my body in its chair. I leapt into the other chair and beckoned Carrist to tie me tightly. Just as he completed this, I heard the massed roar of fifty voices coming from the ruined city, a screaming flow of diabolical rage that set me to shivering. The voices grew louder, even as I yelled instructions at Carrist. He threw down levers, and once more that peculiar droning filled my ears. All the while I yelled out instructions to Carrist. He later told me that for a short space of time both my body and that of the gnome had been shouting identical words at him. Later, just before the transmission was completed, it was my voice, and my voice alone that spoke.

Through all this droning in my ears I heard the raging shouts of the Ganymedans, and heard them converging on the building, producing a sound like distant thunder, shaking it. And that pointer crept so agonizingly slowly down toward zero!

It seemed like eternity, while I sat helpless in the chair, and Carrist feverishly followed instructions as I yelled them out at him. Suddenly I knew they were nearer, and inside the farther end of the building. The roar had suddenly amplified as they came through the doors.

Carrist well knew the need for haste. He leapt over to me as the reversal was completed, and tore the harness and headset off me, making a gash in my right ear. However, I did not know that at the time.

The door from the rear of the bureau burst open, and the gnomes, teeth bared, emitting unholy shrieks of demoniac rage, streaked after us as we ran for the outer door. We passed through, and five seconds later they came pouring after.

I kicked off the heavy metal shoes I was wearing, and Carrist followed my example.

The time wasted in doing that was well worth while. We out-distanced the howling pack, and finally, in a last jump, stood before the ship.

The the foremost ranks of them were on me, ten horribly mouthing creatures that proceeded to tear me limb from limb. I shouted aloud in terror, and kicked about with flying legs, sending them sprawling. They came on, in streams that were unending. I gasped, was conscious that my helmet was loose, had been loose ever since I had helped the station master place my body in its berth. I received a blow from behind. I felt hands grasp me under the arm pits. The whole universe exploded in a dazzling flash of brilliance.

I WOKE hours later, with a terrible snarl. But I soon realized that we left danger behind. Carrist was sitting at the controls of my one-man rocket, and I discovered myself stuffed into a long

compartment normally used for food.

"We got away," I said dully.

He turned, and nodded. "Correct."

"Nobody following?" I asked.

"They were following, but they dropped behind." He sighed. "Sid, I'm sorry for them. When we stole that secret from them, we stole their dream. And life is made of dreams, when you come to think about it."

He added apologetically, "I don't suppose you've thought of that angle. But it's the way I feel."

I stared at the back of his head. I hadn't thought of that angle!

"They won't be able to do a thing about it," Carrist resumed. "They'll make an appeal to Earth, but it'll be easy to ignore them."

Lying there, I bowed my head in shame, and a sense of guilt flooded me. Those Ganymedans couldn't dream any more, they could just die.



ONCE again **Jungle Stories** features the rousing adventures of Ki-Gor, untamed, untutored white jungle king, and Helene Vaughn, pampered, headstrong daughter of civilization—"Ki-Gor—and the Cannibal Kingdom." In addition to the new Ki-Gor novel, the current issue of **Jungle** presents novelets and short stories of bush and veldt by adventure-writers Armand Brigaud, Bill Cook, Maj. E. L. Dyer and others—

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EXILES OF THE THREE RED MOONS

By CARL SELWYN

Slowly, horribly, men died in that outer-space Devil's Island. Carter already could feel the slow-gnawing, Emerald Death. What had he to lose, even on a crazy-wild, 100-to-1 shot Pluto prison-break?

FAINT and distant, the sun fell swiftly behind the close horizon and three warm moons of Pluto climbed from the jagged rocks. Their pale, green light spread upon the rearing crags of dusty silica in a scintillating blanket of emerald, and gleamed richly upon the patches of white lichen.

As Rusty Carter strode down the winding trail from his cave, he gave no thought to the prismatic scene. Even his analytical eyes, veteran of ten years with the Tele-news, were not concerned. He had seen it in daylight, when the freezing winds swept across the glaring monotony of crystal sand, when men fought and killed for sheer sport, and when the Bugs came. The cold horror of day paled the beauty of night. And Rusty Carter was weary of both, after these Plutonian months. His heart quickened as he remembered this was his last evening.

Rounding a bend, he approached the squat, transparent target building gleaming above the restless crowd of men. They stood about in small groups, talking noisily.

Rusty glanced at his watch. It was twenty revs before the monthly ship was due. And this time it would not merely hover to drop drift-tubes containing more doomed men and newsprints from a ruthless Y. M. P. A. This time it would land—take him back to Earth. His heart sang at the thought. Lord, but it would be good to have real soil underfoot again, even the impassive pavement of New York!

As he pushed his way through the motley mob, Rusty's mind flashed far across space to his desk in the great New York Tele-news plant. He remembered Skipper Russell, his city editor, coming over, the twinkle in his sagacious eyes as he told

him to go out and rob a bank. Then the eyes had changed to cool efficiency as he outlined his plan. Rusty was to enter the Planetary National, armed with a vib-ray gun. He was to menace the employees, then be trapped by pre-informed police. In feigned terror, he was to turn the gun upon the crowd, fire. Actors had been hired for the part. The vib-ray loaded with a harmless vibration, they were to fall before him. He would be captured, and with the best lawyers *against* him, sent to Pluto for life. Stories about this dread penal colony were dreadful, but mostly speculative. Forbidden entrance by the Inter-planetary Control, Tele-news agencies had few facts. A first-hand story would be worth millions. It was Rusty's job to get it.

And here he was, the job done. The false arrest and its purpose was known only to Skipper and himself. Even the actors whose "bodies" were immediately claimed by their families, knew nothing of their work's significance. After two months, the city editor would confess to the hoax, pay whatever fine was imposed, and Rusty would be released—with a priceless story.

The two months were over, and the story was priceless. Dealing intimately with the primitive simplicity of souls without hope and their degenerate abandon of all that civilization had bestowed, his tale would weave a pattern of remorse that such conditions should exist anywhere in the universe. Pluto and its four moons were billions of miles from home, anybody's home. Three of its satellites, of about equal size and in close juxtaposition, were the planet's only source of warmth for the sun of the life line planets was dim, far away.



THE flat emergency field was crowded with hulking forms from every planet; talking, gesticulating excitedly, curious vultures awaiting the new broken spirits, black-souled as themselves.

Rusty neared the low target building, saw his dim reflection in a glassy wall; tall and thin despite the cumbersome furs. He had lost weight, he observed. His bronzed seventy-five inches of slender, handsome youth had shed the surplus flesh that he had accumulated in Earthian cities. His body was now trimmed to bare muscle, sinews of steel. One fought to live here. One fought the cold, the Bugs, crazed men—but the hopelessness of the struggle could not be fought, and one died and was glad to die. One of their number in every other respect, Rusty had *hope*—and he had been forced to keep this thought ever before him as the contagion of omnipresent despair clutched at him also.

He ran a long hand through his leonine hair; badly in need of cutting, it swirled, dark sorrel, about his hawk-like features.

The huge Vulcanian, Lothar, approached. Massive head bent, he leaned toward Rusty as he passed.

"We leave at noon," he muttered. "Meet at White Cliff, if you go!"

Familiarity had bred disinterest in the strange forms from other worlds but the nearness of his departure gave new light to the things about him. Lothar, the Vulcanian! Rusty looked at the great creature, and thought of the excitement Vulcan's discovery had occasioned. In the orbit of Mercury, behind the sun, making it ever invisible to Earth, it was the first planet to be found by interstellar exploration. Occurring long before Rusty was born, it was another Stanley-Livingston affair in the annals of feature news. Of course, Vulcan's existence had been calculated by its effect on Mercury's perihelion as early as the nineteenth century by—what was his name?—Leverrier! Who had been disproved by Einstein, twentieth century, who was himself later disproved. Rusty smiled. Get the facts! Soon he would be back at the old job again. . . .

He watched Lothar's monstrous bulk shuffle into the crowd; suddenly he remembered the secret plan for escape that night. There would be five of them: Lothar, two Martians, a Venusian and Spike.

Spike was from his own planet and his only friend here, if he might be called that. The short, chunky Earthian owed his life to Rusty. He had saved him from the Bugs a few days after his arrival, an exploit unheard of here where everyone saw to his own brief existence. But Spike had never forgotten. And when the little boat had been constructed from salvaged drift-tubes, he had inveigled the others into agreeing to take Rusty along.

Rusty Carter felt a twinge of conscience at not confiding his now propinquent departure. He had tactfully avoided a direct refusal, knowing if word of his pardon got around his life would be worthless. A jealous horde would have made short work of him. The others didn't matter; but, whatever heartless creature Spike was, Rusty hoped he got away.

THERE came a shout from the upturned faces of the grisly crowd and Rusty saw a red dot, high in the dim sky. It was the jet-blast of the coming ship. It was coming for him!

His heart leaped as he watched the crimson point grow, a line of flame, a dazzling comet upon the tinted moon glow. The light lengthened and a dark hulk appeared at its head. Then, with a roar, a burst of sparks, the ship entered the Plutonian atmosphere, floated gently downward on idling jets.

The crowd of wretches clamored, jostled one another. Rusty stood apart, tingling with excitement. He planned his journey, his homecoming, with a child-like joy. First he would radio Skipper. Then he would take a long luxurious bath—he could feel the warm water now—then go to sleep, with no nightmare of yellow insects crawling unseen toward him. Then he would . . .

The ship lowered, drifted to a stop high above them. The smile slowly left Rusty's face and his eyes widened.

Glistening in the dim light, the ship remained motionless. Three long objects came into view, gliding slowly from its underside—drift-tubes.

Rusty started forward, eyes fixed to the shining hull, panic leaping into his heart.

In a burst of flame, the ship zoomed upward. There was a faint tingle of ozone in the air, as it ascended, grew smaller in the glowing sky.

Rusty wanted to scream at the disappearing light. He leaned weakly against the wall and a sickness within him was cold and numb, a deadening blow. Then he grinned faintly. Of course! They were sending a special plane—maybe Skipper was coming himself. Of course.

The drift-tubes had landed and the crowd was gathered about them, encircling the newcomers, shouting questions about the outside worlds, inspecting the less formidable for chance possessions. Rusty pushed his way through the mass of foul bodies. At the edge of the group was a smaller, unopened tube—the Tele-news can.

Rusty opened the container, pulled out the roll of thin, printed sheets. It was like Skipper to send a special plane. Sure he would—this was a big story.

Idly glancing through the pages, weeks old, he was surprised to catch the familiar name. Then Rusty tensed, color gone from his face, as the full meaning of the headline came to him.

"PROMINENT EDITOR PASSES:
S. K. Russell, Editor of the New York Tele-news for over thirty years, died at his home today, the victim of a heart attack. Russell, called 'Skipper' by all that knew him, was stricken—"

Rusty dropped the page from his hand. He stared, unseeing, into the night, his mind following a torturing logic to its inescapable conclusion. Skipper was dead—Skipper was the only one that knew—no one else would know of his innocence. . .

He snatched up the paper, read the column, his warrant of doom. Skipper had died three weeks ago, suddenly, before he could even make a will. His wife was sole heir to the Tele-news plant.

Rusty sank down to a rock.

A sense of wild terror gripped him as he realized he was trapped here, for the rest of his life—he had been legally convicted of robbery, murder. Skipper was the only person who could save him. But Skipper was dead!

Men howled, laughed as they passed him. And Rusty Carter knew he was now one of them. No more was there the glow of a secret thought, that soon he could leave—he was to stay until he died just as these

others died, screaming or with a voiceless stare in the cold glare of Pluto.

Their laughter faded away and he was alone.

WALKING aimlessly, Rusty left the deserted clearing, plodded up a sparkling path. He wandered amid the ghastly spangled crags, neither knowing nor caring where he went. It did not matter and nothing mattered, for he was dead inside. The three moons of Pluto hung low in the east and the enormous Great Moon, the nearby satellite of the planet, arose beside their departing light, a darker green.

Soon, another day. The cold wind. The Bugs. Haunted, restless sleep. The scream of a lonely soul in dreaming delirium. But what matter the cold and the Bugs? They *could* bring death. Was it not better so?

Rusty came to a long declivity, the rocks sloping down to a wide crater. In the center was a pale wall of lichen, smoothly white on the side of a towering peak. It was White Cliff. Largest landmark on the narrow-horizoned planet, it reared for hundreds of feet into the thin air. Upon its vast sides was a thick blanket of the plants, giving the cliff an unbroken, white distinctiveness and its name. Never visited by day because of the Bugs, it was rarely approached even at night. The reflecting vegetation surrounding it in a dim glow, the Bugs lingered even then. Foot-long obscenities of fuzzy yellow, razor-tipped tendrils before formless maws, by day they swarmed from every crevice of the distorted terrain. Subsisting chiefly upon the rabbit-like veedles, they would also eat a man.

Rusty stared at the ghostly scene, suddenly remembering the words of Lothar, the Vulcanian. Preferring the Bugs to curious eyes, it was here that the drift-tubes had been stored, the escape ship built. Escape! Why hadn't he thought of it before? As criminal as they now, he must take a criminal's chance—the odds were all against their survival—a swift death in the suffocating void of space, the sudden burn of a patrol's flame-gun. But each was a feeble fear. Death here was slow, gnawing for years at a weakening brain. Any chance was worth taking.

He glanced over his shoulder at the rising shape of the Great Moon, and sped across the quartz dust to the cliff.

Rounding the rise, Rusty came upon a dark form in a little clearing. It was the ship. Startled figures whirled as he burst upon them, relaxed as he was recognized. The great bulk of Lothar was stark against the dim light.

"Hello!" came a husky Earthian voice, and Rusty was relieved to see the barrel shape of Spike appear, his mop of black hair haloed in the green glow.

Rusty looked at the squat hull of the oddly constructed boat. The others gathered around him.

"Crude but crafty," admired Spike.

Rusty glanced at the others. The tall Martians stood at the side, slender silhouettes. The Vulcanian towered above him, long incisors gleaming between drooping lips.

"I think you know the rest," said Spike. "Here's Fish."

Rusty noticed for the first time the frail form of a Venusian in the shadows. He moved silently to Rusty, extended a finny hand in the Earthian clasp adopted by the Universe.

Venusians were an eternal surprise to Rusty. Half the height of an average man, limbs thin and tipped with prehensile spines, they were covered with fish-like scales, a delicate lavender in color. A single eye in the middle of the forehead, throughout the Universe they carried optional misnomers, "Cyclops" or "Fish."

Rusty shook the cold hand and for a moment forgot his plight, as he felt his usual presentiments. These weird creatures from the cloud-hidden planet never failed to arouse unreasoning tingles of distrust.

"When do we leave?" asked Rusty. He must have action. The thought of his abandonment here would soon drive him raving mad.

"All ready," said Spike. "Waiting for the moon to get in position."

Lothar tapped Rusty on the shoulder, his huge, four-fingered hand almost knocking him down.

"Make words," he boomed in his throat. "You go, must be one with us—steal moon ship—pirates."

"He means we head for the Great Moon,

steal a plane there and see what we can pick up in the Earthian traffic lanes," Spike translated. "It took me a long time to persuade them that you were okay, so be nice!"

"Sure," said Rusty. He had barely heard the words. "Sure."

Lothar stared at him with his slanting, narrow eyes. He finally nodded, moved away.

THE little ship was crudely made, Rusty noticed, of cans in which the prisoners had been dropped. It was held down by ropes stretching over the hull. The thick, insulated drift-tubes were simple antigravitic units of low power. With the engineering skill of the Martians, six of these had been fixed together, forming a squat hull, blunt at one end. Powered by fuel salvaged from countless near-dry tubes, it was planned, he was told, to wait till the nearby satellite was directly overhead, then release the ship, allowing it to drift upward. After a few miles—with an overload of fuel they would drift fast—they would be caught by the pull of the larger planet, sucked into it. The gravity of the Great Moon would overcome their diminished power and they would drift down. There was, of course, no oxygen equipment and they would doubtless lose consciousness. But it would be only a few moments in space and they should revive in the dense atmosphere of the moon. It was a chance they would have to take.

Creeping comets! thought Rusty. Wouldn't he have a story if he ever reached the Tele-news plant again! But would he ever see Earth again?

He felt little optimism when he looked up at the planet slowly swinging toward them. Gigantic, almost as large as Pluto, its rugged land and dark seas were quite visible across the few thousand miles. The triplet-moons were dead, of their own radiations, but the Great Moon, in a separate orbit, was eternally tropical. A regular transit to the eccentric orbit of the warming spheres, it received a degree of heat that Pluto's greater distance denied. Its atmosphere was thin, tinged with ozone, but breatheable. It rotated slowly, a perceptible movement. A smooth patch came into view upon its green surface and Rusty remembered it was the only inhabitable

portion of the planet. The rest was insect-infested jungle, shallow oceans. If they waited till it was overhead, they could not miss the moon. But they *must* hit that little spot upon its surface.

"We're waiting till the Plain comes around again," Spike answered Rusty's thoughts. "Have to leave navigation to the Martians. They have an uncanny sense of precision."

"What—" began Rusty.

He heard a slithering in the plants behind them.

They turned. Rusty saw three Bugs crawl into the dim light. Yellow horrors, they moved swiftly. Sharp feelers waving, they advanced like giant cockroaches. Others came behind them. They swarmed into the clearing.

He turned to run. There was no fighting them. There was no running away—Bugs poured from all sides. Lord! must he die now? When a chance was so near? They were surrounded. He stood staring, the others behind him, weaponless.

Rusty remembered one man he had seen after their work. He sickened at the picture. Blood was what they smelled, what they sought. Those feelers chopped at one's legs, severed the feet, hovered with sucking mouths about the face of the victim, still alive.

The Bugs came on.

One neared Rusty. A tendril knifed at him. He kicked madly into the yellow mass, felt the pulpy insect crush under the blow. The ground was a blanket of writhing yellow, spreading toward them. He hoped it would be quick. But it never was. One died slowly. The life sucked from him. Rusty kicked at another. The others were stamping wildly.

"Into the ship!" yelled Spike.

The tubes! They would be safe there. Rusty leaped a slashing wave as there was a rush for the ship. He went into the ochre, crawling things with one bound, into a drift-can with another. He clanged the port over him, heard the others slam shut.

Rusty lay in the silent darkness, unable to move in the cramped cylinder. They would have to wait for the Bugs to leave. It might be days! The air was slowly becoming bad. He would have to open the port soon. He might be able to open it just a fraction, but those tendrils were thin, they might whip in. The place was stifling.

His throat ached. There was bursting panic in his lungs.

Suddenly he was pressed against the bottom of the tube by an invisible force. They were moving.

But why? How? The Great Moon was not in position yet! They would miss it! He raised a hand to the port-lock. It would be better to jump. And the air—he could not breathe. He fumbled with the lock, could not open it. Weakly he clawed at the port. They would—drift—into—space. . . .

Slowly, his mind relaxed into unconsciousness.

RUSTY opened his eyes and breathed deeply of exquisite air. He saw green foliage above him. He was lying upon a verdant substance, soft and moist. It was very hot. His furs had been removed.

"It's time you came to!" said a voice, and Rusty sat up, saw the rotund Earthian approaching. He glanced around, saw the drift-tube nearby, half-buried in the mud. The others were standing beside it, their odd appearance increased by the removal of their heavy clothing.

They had made it. They had escaped! He was free!

"What happened?" he asked, head dizzy.

"Fool Bugs cut the ropes," said Spike. "We floated off Pluto. Several of them must have held on the rope-ends for a while. Their weight slowed us down till the moon came over, but we hit in the jungle—an ocean, either way, between us and the Plain."

"Lord!" said Rusty. "No man ever crossed this part of the planet on foot!"

"Nobody ever escaped from Pluto either," said Spike. "Until ten minutes ago." He yanked Rusty to his feet.

Rusty looked at the dense wall of plants about them. There was barely room for a man to pass between the twisted trunks and vines. Overhead was the same thick mass of green. Faint light seeped through. But here was a single, tangible thing—something one could grasp with the hands, fight for life—a goal at the end. There was a hope! It was better than Pluto.

The others came up.

"What now?" said one of the Martians in his toneless voice.

"Cross jungle, cross sea," said Lothar.

"Let's get going," said Spike. He turned to the seemingly impenetrable growths surrounding them.

Rusty followed. His heart stopped.

A great white thing fell slowly in front of them. It dangled in mid-air. It was a spider—bigger than an Earthian cow. Green, checked eyes bulging, it hung from a thick strand of translucent material.

Spike sprang back as the monstrosity reached out a hairy tendril. Rusty stood hypnotized by the pale hideousness of the creature.

With a quick movement it swung toward them.

Rusty broke his trance. He leaped aside. A tentacle slapped across his face as he sprawled into the mire.

He started up, saw the insect crouched upon the writhing form of a Martian. Shrill, animal screams cut the air as the red man struggled frantically to escape the tightening white claws. The gaping man drew close.

"Get him, Lothar!" shouted Spike from the edge of the jungle.

The eight-foot Uranian plodded to the thing, short legs working rapidly. With a massive hand, he caught one stalk-like feeler, and wrenched and twisted it from the globose body.

Holding the wriggling Martian, the spider flung itself upon Lothar. It landed upon him with all its pulpy weight. The Martian quit screaming, lay still. His eyes protruded and Rusty saw that his face, normally light red, was slowly darkening.

The ghastly pale insect lay upon the Uranian body, covering his chest and arms. It did not move. The eyes glazed. Then slowly the creature rolled over upon crumpled legs. It twitched feebly.

Lothar arose, his upper body a mass of pink, gelatinous fluid. Rusty revolted at the gory figure.

The Martian was dead. His fellow red man searched his pockets, shrugged and did not look at him again.

Lothar returned from a pool where he had washed away the "blood."

"Poke hands in soft middle," he grinned. "Pull insides out!"

Spike laughed uproariously. He stepped toward the plants.

They laugh, thought Rusty, and one of

us is dead! They'll laugh when the next one dies. Who will it be? All? He looked into the green walls and the question arose from fact, not pessimism. He had thought those two Plutonian months had hardened him. Could he stand this new world of new terrors?

Warily moving around the body of the shuddering insect, Rusty followed them into the jungle.

THE great moon's vast vegetal areas were a monotony of green. Pools of water, matted plants, glaucous mire underfoot, even the atmosphere was a virescent mist, tinted by an unknown gas. But the life there had not the monotony of the scene.

Pluto was a dying world; the moon, still upon its first step along the timeless path of evolution. Every mile brought new terrors. Carnivorous beetles. The purple *Gux* dragon, twenty feet long, daggered with venomous fangs. And the white spiders. The little gnats, slightly smaller than an Earthian hornet, followed constantly, raised deep sores upon bare faces and arms.

Slow against the resisting foliage, Rusty followed the maddening pace and considered every step his last. Snatching at strange fruit, pausing at shallow pools for unrefreshing sleep, they lost all conception of time. There was no distinct night and day, no restful blackness, only a change of hue in the tinted air and painted sky; a green which deepened to a phosphoric glow, then faded again as the strange sun burned redly over the jungle. Wary to falling, sick of mind with the heat and the moist air, Rusty plodded along at Spike's side, marveled at his fellow Earthian's endurance. But pirating about every planet of the system, had hardened Spike to anything the Universe could inflict. The little Venusian was not affected at all, but rather thrived in the dank heat which was little different from his native world. And immuned on a world that spun ceaselessly from hot to cold, his native Vulcan, nothing fazed the mighty Lothar.

The Martian, however, fared worse than the rest. His body, covered with thick, red hair, was matted with a viscous perspiration. His large ears drooped as he struggled along, spindling form bent as he slid

one weary, primate foot after the other.

Rusty wondered how they knew the right direction. Dizzy with the heat, he did not realize he had even asked the question.

"Depend on Lothar," said Spike, wiping a streaming brow. "Vulcanites can find their way out of hell."

Hearing his name, the giant dropped back beside them.

"Any idea how much farther?"

As Lothar answered, a long, green coil fell silently upon the Venusian at Rusty's side, yanked him swiftly up into the thick plants.

It happened fast. Rusty doubted his eyes. It must be the heat—but the little green man was gone.

Spike yelled.

The Martian staggered up. They peered into the dense growth above and there was only the heavy leaves. The Venusian had vanished, as if spirited away by the Wisps of Jupiter.

"Another one," said Spike. He stepped on into the jungle.

"Wait!" cried Rusty. They couldn't just leave—without even looking. To what depths had these men sunk? Was there no spark of humanity left?

He grabbed a limb, swung up into the matted roof.

It was a stifling mass of green. He could see nothing. He probed about, futilely. There was not even a trace where the Venusian's body might have been dragged.

Spike was climbing up when he came down.

"There's nothing there! I—!"

Spike shrugged. "Let's go," he said impassively. He kicked aside the plants, struck off into the vegetation.

Rusty tarried, gazing up into the foliage. There was nothing he could do. There was nothing up there. That made *two*. Men had never survived this place. How long before it would be his turn?

He followed the three disappearing figures.

The heat closed in and the world swam, a green daze, before his eyes. His body moved by sheer will. His mind was far away, a cub reporter on his first assignment. He shook his head savagely as the Tele-news office appeared before him, a wavering hallucination.

IT was several miles before they noticed that the Martian was gone.

Rusty looked back and there was only the dark jungle, quiet and ominous, green with a mirage-like beauty of fresh life, but a beauty of silent death. What things watched unseen from those thick masses? Watched their every move, ready to spring upon them? First the Martian killed by a spider. Then the little Venusian. Now another—to what death? God, if a man must die let him die *seeing*, not a swift vanishing to unknown terrors.

"Let him go," said Spike. "I never did like Martians."

Rusty wearily started to turn back. He tried to persuade the others. Spike and the Uranian laughed at his "girlish" exhortations. Every man for himself—they were probably right. He had a story to tell on Earth, one which he must live to tell. But Earth was far away.

They trudged on.

This time Rusty saw it happen. Or thought he did.

Spike was walking a short distance ahead. A thick, slender *something* fell slightly over his head.

Rusty screamed to him.

Long acquainted with danger, the man fell flat.

And the rope-like thing whipped back, vanished into the plants above. It had been long and green, a slick, menacing danger of no name.

After that, the three walked side by side. And the jungle stopped abruptly. Before them was the purple sea.

The tinted ocean lay smooth as glass, not a ripple upon its dull surface. Directly ahead, rising from the vast expanse of still water, was a dim, distant island, mountains gently rolling.

"It's the Plain!" cried Spike.

It was faint on the horizon, a hazy undulation darker than the mist of distance.

"Looks like mountains," said Rusty wearily. He despaired of finding anything right in this irrational world.

"It's the Plain," said Spike again. "You can't see it. They're the cliffs behind it."

He stepped to the water, waded in. Lothar followed.

"Hey!" yelled Rusty. "Why not built a raft? We can't swim that distance!"

"Build a raft from what? Those trees

won't float. And the water's only five feet at the deepest."

Rusty gingerly waded in. The liquid, thicker than water but of similar elements, according to Spike, was covered with a thin film of vegetable oil. It was sticky, hot.

Making slow progress in the heavy stuff, Rusty splashed along in the wake of the ponderous Lothar. The water slowly deepened to his chest.

A scaly head popped up beside him. Water snake!

Impulsively, Rusty struck out with his fist.

The head disappeared, came to the surface again a short distance away.

It was not a snake. It was a Venusian—the Venusian.

He looked at Rusty and scowled, if a fish can scowl. Rusty stared, unbelieving. He had appeared so quietly the others had not turned. Where could he have come from? How could he have escaped the thing in the jungle?

"How did you get here!"

"Why do you strike at me, Earthman!"

Rusty uselessly attempted to explain. They could never understand Earthian reactions. Rusty hated the green creatures.

The Venusian sneered, swam silently to the others.

"Well!" said Spike, with his usual calm. "We didn't expect to see you again! What happened?"

"Tree *v*wark."

"Oh," said Spike. He turned and waded on.

Rusty stared, aghast. These men weren't human.

"Hey!" he called. "What the hell's a 'Tree *v*wark'?"

Spike turned and smiled.

"*V*wark that lives in trees," he answered, turned back to the water.

And Rusty knew he could expect nothing more. The Venusians were strange of body, had stranger ways. They never spoke of their activities. It was an instilled custom of their kind. And he knew why Spike had not interrogated further, uselessly.

SCATTERED and splashing, the four waded toward the distant hills. Earthmen, Venusian, Vulcanian.

The Venusian swam easily ahead, often

disappearing for long periods beneath the surface, absorbing oxygen from the water as adequately as from the air.

Rusty, succumbing to his innate get-the-facts complex, asked if the seas contained life, was answered in the negative. But he questioned the statement when they passed a half-submerged creature that weighed well over five tons, heavy clawed limbs rearing stiffly. The air about it was a nausea.

"Mud animal," explained Spike. "Life here came from the mire instead of the sea. With the exception of the Plain, the whole planet is covered with soft mud, thousands of miles deep. It is there that most of the life exists. This one probably got wounded, came blindly up and died."

As the Earthian spoke, he halted, his face suddenly darkened.

Rusty, advancing to him, felt a strong suction beneath his feet. Go back! But he could not turn back, nor go forward.

"Lothar!" yelled Spike, but the mighty Vulcanian was also caught fast in the grim pull.

The mire under the water had softened, like quicksand. It tugged at his feet and legs, pulling him slowly down into the green ooze. He splashed with powerful strokes. He sank deeper.

"Fish!" cried Spike. The lithe Venusian idly tread water beside them, showed little interest. "Get us out of here!"

The water slowly climbed up Rusty's fear-tingling body. He could feel the liquid creeping up, as he was pulled down, into the slime. He strained with all the power of his legs. Siezed them with his hands and pulled. He sank deeper, slowly. He could feel the bottomless suction. Like a nightmare in which one falls slowly. It was no nightmare. It was stark reality. Thick water, green ooze. He splashed wildly.

Fish stared from one to the other, curiously.

"Get you out?" he asked.

This was madness. It could not happen to him. He was Rusty Carter, an ordinary Tele-newsman. He could not die here. The water was beneath his chin. Rusty remembered no aid could be expected from the Venusian. His nature, utterly individualistic, could barely conceive of anyone needing, much less asking for help. Damn Venusians.

"Damn you, I'll twist your scaly neck!" cried Spike. "Help us out of here!"

Rusty sank lower. Neck muscles strained to hold his head above the surface. He remembered once on Mars seeing six Venusians killed separately by a lizard, when together they could have easily torn it to pieces. He choked as water entered his mouth, swallowed. Must keep mouth closed. It had a sour taste.

Spike's tone changed. "Pull us out and I will give you much whirl-water when we reach Earth!"

Whisky was the one temptation of the bright star's people, something they coveted, could not understand. Rusty's eyes were filming, the water upon his face, straining back and upward. Interplanetary Control had long forbidden the sale of liquor to Venusians. The water was at his nose, burning, bubbling. He gasped. It entered his nose, his throat, tickled in his chest. He wanted to cough. The water covered his mouth. This was all. This was drowning. Wild fear, insane rage surged through him. His head went under. He tugged mightily at the water above him, felt hands in air. His lungs screamed for air, his chest bursting. He opened his mouth, and took a deep, gasping breath. . . .

Coughing, he was carried a safe distance, dropped unceremoniously into the water again. His eyes were blurred and he was sick. He wanted to kill that Venusian. They were all that way.

Sputtering, Rusty rubbed his eyes, saw Spike and Lothar watching from shallow water. The Venusian swam ahead.

They turned and waded on.

IT was night when they reached the Plain. Then it was pitch black, like fingers against his eyes. They had passed the balanced zone. Here there was a kilo-rev of darkness, they said. Rusty was told to get in line—the Uranian, cat-like, would lead the way.

With Spike before him and the cold fin of the Venusian to the rear, they were led for hours into the darkness.

Rusty's head vaguely ached. He walked with closed eyes, almost slept.

He bumped into something—Spike. Had he slept?

Lothar grunted, "Settlement."

Rusty strained his tired eyes, could see nothing. They marched on.

A faint glow appeared in the distance, slowly widened, became dots of light. It was one of the smaller moon settlements, Spike said; chiefly populated by rich farmers who raised the delicious *cavote*, luscious fruit cultivated for the interplanetary trade.

They halted on the outskirts of the city.

The city was dark. There were few lights but Rusty looked at the shadowed windows and knew people were asleep there, peacefully in a commonplace existence. For a moment he revered their simple lives, and the ordinary held no memory of monotony but a yearning for its rest as his heart went into the city and softly cried for admission. But there was no response to his pleas, only the black windows, and his longings were but a hollow mockery of his weary soul. He was a fugitive, a convicted murderer in the eyes of all he might meet—he was as these with whom he had fled just punishment. Trapped by a laughing fate, he felt little hope for peace ever again. His loneliness flamed to rage.

"Where's the space port?" asked Spike.

"I take," said Lothar, who had been there before.

He led them around the cluster of dimly lighted buildings, past the mud-flats of cavot plants. The city was voiceless, the streets were vacant. As they turned a corner, a great clearing spread before them, a landing field dotted with the shadowed shapes of space liners, and smaller craft. The field was sparsely lighted.

They paused.

"Spread out. See what's about," Spike whispered. "Meet here in ten revs."

The men slowly faded into the darkness.

Rusty saw a flat, lighted building at a near corner of the field.

Moving stealthily to a glowing window, he peeped over the sill. The walls were filled with space-station equipment. In the center of the room was a table around which nine men were seated, Martian pilots and a native watchman. As Rusty looked, the watchman arose, strapped a gun about him and left the room.

Rusty heard an outside door open and close, fled silently.

He returned, found the Venusian and Lothar. Spike had not come back.

THEY waited, staring into the darkness.

The night was suddenly torn by the staccato hiss of a vib-ray.

Spike appeared, breathless. "Watchman saw me!" he panted. "Found a ship. Come on!"

He sped again into the shadows, led them to a big space liner which nestled in the darkness of a hangar. The door was open. Spike motioned for them to enter.

A form materialized at the stern of the ship. A vib-ray spat.

Rusty, following the Venusian in the small door, saw Spike leap at the man. He could not make them out in the darkness. As he jumped down, he heard a quickly throttled groan.

Spike appeared again. "Get in! Quick!" Shouts and the sound of running feet came toward them.

Lothar was already inside. Rusty climbed in. Spike slammed the heavy door.

No sound came through the insulated walls but as they paused for breath the room grew rapidly warm—hot.

"They're raying the door!" cried Rusty. He had seen it done in many a police raid.

The plate glowed to a red heat, melted to a puddle. They sprang aside.

"Come out!" commanded a toneless voice. "We've got you!"

Rusty ran to the left, the others to the right. He tried the door to the next room. It was locked. The others had disappeared into the forward compartments, the door closed behind them. Rusty no longer felt fear nor panic. He was an animal now, fighting to live. He silently crept to the side of the seared hole in the hull. A dim glow of light entered from the field.

A sleek vib-ray poked its long nose in the doorway. Rusty waited. The gun was followed by an arm. A man came into view. His skin was red, Martian. He climbed into the ship, followed by six more.

Rusty crouched in the darkness, holding his breath.

They stood in the dim light, peering warily about. There had been nine at the station, Rusty remembered. Spike had gotten one. Where was the other? But they would discover him in a moment.

Rusty moved swiftly. He snatched a rifle from the nearest man. With the same

movement, brought the stock upward, smashed it into the crimson face.

The others whirled.

Rusty leveled the vib-ray at them. They stared and their guns clattered to the floor. Slowly, their hands raised.

"Spike!" yelled Rusty.

The door opened and the Earthian peered out. Lothar and the Venusian crowded behind him.

"What's the best ship here?" Rusty demanded of the tight-lipped Martians. There was no answer. What did one do when one had a gun, wanted a man to speak and he wouldn't?

Spike entered the room. "I'll make 'em talk!" he said. He picked up a fallen gun, and before Rusty could stop him had fired into the group.

Four men died to show Rusty what one did.

The answers of the remaining three were as specific as they were hasty.

"Shall I finish 'em off?" asked Spike, amused. Rusty moved to stop him.

"Shall I finish you off?" said a voice at the door. "Don't turn around! Stay where you are!"

The missing man, thought Rusty. His heart did not leap at the sudden voice. He had grown to expect these things. Would he soon laugh at death as did Spike?

The Martians inside smirked, bent for their guns.

Rusty was looking at Spike. What would *he* do? And Spike was not slow in acting. His gun was still leveled at the stooping men. His face did not change as flame shot from the barrel. In utter bravado, Spike rayed them down. Darted swiftly back against the wall out of the line of fire.

The gun hissed outside, missed and struck into the bodies of his own fellows. He would fire again.

Before he could turn the gun, Rusty was upon him.

They crashed to the ground. Rusty's spring carried him over the man, who was on his feet instantly, gun poised.

The gun was silent. Rusty rolled cautiously over.

He saw the bulk of the Vulcanian looming behind the crimson man. A huge hand had crushed his shoulder.

Lothar raised the Martian, bashed him

against the side of the ship. He fell limply, did not move.

Rusty got up. There were seven dead men in the plane. One was before him, broken and bleeding. Another lay somewhere in the shadows. The nine men he had seen at the table in the station were dead. Was it his fault? He had killed none of them. No? They had been protecting their rights, their property. They had died doing so.

Fish climbed down from the ship. He kicked aside the body on the ground. Lothar laughed deep in his chest.

"We're wasting time," said Spike with a grin. He turned to the designated ship.

Rusty wondered if he could write of these things. The Tele-news seemed but a hazy memory.

THE plane was a light cruiser, swift and well-armed. Probably the property of a wealthy merchant, it was luxuriously furnished.

Rusty gave the ship no more than a tired glance, waited for the take-off.

Jets roared in a steep ascension, then hushed to a restful drone. They passed out of the moon's heavy atmosphere. Rusty saw the stars cease to twinkle, change to a steady, burning light.

They were in space, dim and shadowy—headed home.

Rusty, Spike and the Vulcanian fell into berths as the ship was set on its course. Navigation was left to the Venusian. He did not sleep, gave no sign of fatigue. It was part of his nature.

Rusty slept dreamlessly and when he awoke, he found almost two days had passed. Mars glowed redly behind them and the star of Earth was bright before the view Plates.

Earth. Home. New York. He stared at the pin point of light, tried to locate the city. Millions of people there, at this distance—nothing. The Tele-news! A simple joy tingled within Rusty as he gazed at the distant planet. He was coming home. He had been far, he had a story to tell—one that had long outgrown its intended bounds. He saddened, however, as he remembered there would be no Skipper to hear his tale.

Spike came in.

5—Planet Stories—Summer

"Gosh," said Rusty. "Is there anything to eat?"

"Not much," he answered. "We'll have to catch another liner before long."

"Buy food?" asked Rusty, sleepily.

"Buy it!" Spike roared with laughter. "What do you think we got this ship for? Buy it! We take it—and anything else they happen to have aboard. We scuttled one liner off Saturn while you slept."

"Lord!" thought Rusty. This was what Lothar had mentioned on Pluto. They had turned pirate. And he was considered one of them. They knew nothing of the scheme that had landed him on the stellar prison. They thought he was as they—another rat driven from the law-respecting Universe.

Rusty could rationalize the dead men whose ship they had taken. The ship had been available in no other way. It had been a fair fight. But now it could go no further. Earth gleamed in the distance. His part must change here; he had fought against Earth's laws, that he might regain them. He must stand for them now.

"Spike," began Rusty, "there is something I never told you. I must tell you now." And he told of the false crime that had brought him to Pluto, how he was to have been released and his sudden abandonment. He was a fugitive, yes, in a way; but he must get to Earth—somehow vindicate himself. It would be impossible if he added real crimes to the pretension that had put him here. Spike must understand.

The chunky Earthian's face changed from surprise to rage. Then to a deadly calm. "We better not let the others know of this," he said.

The Venusian entered. He must have been just outside the door.

Rusty saw his eye, the cruel glint there, knew here would be a climax to his adventure. And he knew the result, while strength remained in his body, would be well. He could not lose now—Earth was too near, the end of his journey was at hand.

THE Venusian stared at them with his single, beady eye. "Secrets!" he sneered. "I heard. An Earthian informer! I'll fix that!" He drew a short vib-pistol from his belt, leveled it in Rusty's face. His fishy eye gleamed.

Rusty met the gaze. "Put away the

gun," he said. Rusty was experiencing a new sensation. He could kill this green thing without a twinge of conscience.

"Put up the gun," said Spike.

"Ah, so you're with him, too! I'll get you both." The pistol veered to Spike.

Rusty saw the bulk of Lothar squeeze the door behind the Venusian.

"Lothar is behind you, Fish," said Spike calmly.

The little green man slithered into a corner beside the door.

The Vulcanian stood there dumbly.

"Lothar," said Fish silkily, "these Earthians have turned against us—will sell us to the Patrol—send us back to Pluto. The red-haired one was a spy since the first!"

The huge Vulcanian stood silently, looking at Spike. His tremendous arms dangled at his sides.

"Don't believe him, Lothar," said Spike.

"Shut up, Earthman!" snapped the Venusian.

Spike ignored him. "We aren't—" He never finished.

The gun spit at him.

Spike stared at Fish in astonishment. Then he fell forward upon his face.

Lothar looked on foolishly.

The Venusian hissed softly between his teeth. The gun covered them both.

Rusty stared unbelieving. Spike was dead. He suddenly felt very alone. Spike had been merciless, cruel, little different from the others of his kind on Pluto. But he had been a man—an Earthian—a friend. . . .

Lothar swung. Before the green man could squeeze the trigger. Fast. A heavy arm struck the scaly hand, snapped the gun from a broken wrist. The vib-ray fell to the floor.

Rusty watched him, motionless. Lothar grasped the green neck with one hand, placed iron fingers deftly over the squirming head and—as a man would pick up a marble—he plucked out the single eye. Rusty cringed.

Fish screamed. His reptilian arms flailed the air. Lothar slowly dismembered him, tore off his limbs one by one. He yanked the head from the twitching body—hurled the gory thing across the room.

Rusty stared with a strange fascination

at the ghastly vengeance. He was still staring blankly when Lothar came toward him.

"You Earthman! I thought spy! You die, too."

The trance left Rusty. The giant Vulcanian loomed over him.

"No," Rusty said. "No! Lothar, listen—!" He suddenly realized just what was happening. He would be helpless in those powerful hands.

The creature reached for him. Rusty remembered covering a match between Earthman and Vulcanian once for the Tele-news sport section. The Earthian, champion of three worlds, hadn't had a chance.

He retreated slowly as the brute came on, bumped sharply against the wall.

The giant stopped before him, little eyes squinting at him. The stark deadliness of the face filled Rusty with an eerie fright. Silently, a massive hand grabbed his arm.

With all the strength of his 170 pounds, Rusty swung at the jutting chin.

His hand smashed. The Vulcanian did not even blink.

He lifted Rusty, swung him around. His hold slipped and Rusty was flung against the opposite wall.

Arising dazed, he saw the Vulcanian lumbering over.

Rusty had seen what had happened to Fish. It would be the same with him. How could he fight a man he couldn't hurt? He went ill as his foot slid upon one of the Venusian's severed arms. The star of Earth gleamed brightly in the window and Rusty died a little death of sorrow.

The great Lothar plodded forward.

Rusty glanced wildly about, heart trembling. His shirt was growing wet. There was nothing—he almost fainted at what he saw. Beneath his feet was the weapon dropped by the Venusian.

Rusty snatched at the pistol as the Vulcanian swept upon him. He fired into the hairy chest. The mighty arm came on, knocked Rusty from his feet. Rusty fired again as he fell.

The monster's body fell across him, dead.

As he crawled madly from under the heavy body, Rusty saw the side viewplates filled with a gleaming hull. And printed on the sleek metal was a familiar insignia.

It was a space-plane alongsidie—the Stellar Patrol. Hope leaped like a flame. His long journey was ended.

As he got to his feet, a voice thundered in the room. "Coming aboard for inspection!" The sound came through the walls by radio. "Open space-lock or we blast!"

Rusty ran to the adjoining room, swung the lever opening the outside trap.

It was barely opened when three men in space outfits entered. They slammed the trap behind them, doffed their helmets, entered the ship. Rusty could have embraced them. Earthmen, shaven and clean. . . .

The men came in, guns drawn. "Keep your hands in the air!" cautioned one with a captain's stripe. He searched Rusty, pistol against his chest. The others went forward.

"Wait!" cried Rusty. "You don't understand. . . ." His words died away. A stolen ship—four escaped Plutonian prisoners, three dead. How could they understand?

"What a mess," said one, glancing into the other compartment. "Looks like this fellow saved us trouble—killed off his chums before we came!"

How should he begin? How could he explain the stolen ship? They would never believe his story. And nine men had been killed in the ship's theft. He had done his part in their death.

They searched the ship thoroughly, Rusty closely guarded by the officer.

"I am Rusty Carter! I—"

"Shut up. We don't care who you are."

The patrolmen returned.

"No one else aboard," one reported. "Three bodies, two rayed by the same gun. A Venusian pulled apart—he must have been pretty annoyed with him!"

Rusty was pushed into a chair.

"Okay," said the captain. "Talk! We know you got this boat from the Great Moon near Pluto. We know you've been terrorizing the terrestrial traffic lanes for days. You killed nine men at the Great Moon space port. Where you come from?"

As calmly as possible, Rusty told his complete story, from the beginning of his mission in New York to his awakening presence in the ship. Hearing the story, he knew himself it was no good.

When he finished the patrolmen laughed.

"A good story anyway," said the officer, "but with its flaws. Editor Russell's dead and you can prove nothing. You lie! You could not have escaped Pluto, even in the fantastic way you said. And you might have waded the sea but no man could survive the jungle of the Great Moon. Then, of course, you and your bloody crew *have* been preying upon the commerce lines for two days, destroyed one liner. Even the hodies in there could convict you of murder. Give up, lad. You're a goner!"

Rusty sought vainly for belief. They must believe him! He could not return to Pluto again.

Without further ceremony, he was forced into a space suit.

"You know the law concerning piracy or murder in the space lanes, of course," said the Captain, adjusting his helmet. "Interplanetary law authorizes *death at apprehension.*"

It could not be.

But he was carried to the patrol ship, locked in a guarded cell.

HE sat upon the metal bunk, head heavy upon his hands. It was all over now. He had pled and sworn to no avail. His execution order had been filed. After the customary forty revs of grace, he would die. They would not even let him radio the Tele-news. Give up, his weary mind cried. At least death was better than Pluto. But he was so near home, his job completed. A priceless story would die with him. He felt fear no longer and his unreasoning rage had passed. There was only a great sadness, that he had come this far—to meet defeat. And at the hands of those whom he had sought.

The man before his cell moved away. The guard was probably changing.

Another patrolman approached, stared intently into the cage. "So you're Rusty Carter," he said. Rusty said nothing. No verbal torment could touch him. "I knew Carter once. He was a fine fellow then."

Rusty looked up. He had never seen the man before.

"Yeah," the guard continued, "Carter saved my reputation once—when I was caught in a bribery charge ten years ago, when I was on the ground force in New York."

Rusty searched his mind. He remembered a civil bribery scandal the Tele-news had uncovered many years ago. Several of the accused had been released by his activities. But the man before him struck no chord of recognition.

He was smiling. "You never knew me," he said, "but I knew you. I helped send you a medal when we were cleared, by your efforts. It's too bad you went wrong. Is there anything you want, in your last moments?"

Rusty almost burst with joy. Was there anything he wanted! "Can you get a message through to Earth?"

"If this is a trick, you won't live to see it done. I suppose I could—I know the radio operator."

"Send this. Quick! To the New York Tele-news office. Tell them what's happened. Tell them to do something!"

He waited for what seemed hours.

The man returned, sent the other guard away, shoved a printed message through the bars.

Rusty read with outward calm. His heart fell within him.

"Carter legally convicted attempted robbery, murder. Appealed to President, no avail. Nothing we can do. He was a good Tele-news man. Sorry."

He sank down to the bunk, the paper falling from his fingers.

Absently he heard the sound of marching feet in the corridor outside, looked up blankly, saw uniformed men before his cell.

The door opened and he was led out.

Rusty shook hands with the guard, was marched down the hall to the stern of the ship. It didn't matter now.

The older method of execution had been repealed, Rusty remembered idly. Instead of merely dropping the man out of the space lock, he was now placed in a disintegration chamber.

The lethal box stood before him, a small, compact cylinder of metal, levers upon its side.

The door was opened.

"Anything you wish to say?"

A man was speaking to him. Did he have anything to say? What could he say? But one should die with a flourish, a purple passage. Oddly none came. He merely wished the business over. He could rest then. Did he have anything to say?

"No, but you're wrong."

"Stubborn pirate. They all die innocent!"

The officer slammed the door.

Machinery whirled. It was very dark. Boy! wouldn't the public eat this story up! But in a few moments, before his mind could know it, he would be gone—body and mind—disintegrated into their component elements. He would be a wisp of gas, floating out when the door opened.

The humming stopped abruptly. It was dark and silent. It flashed to Rusty that this must be death.

Then the door opened. Would he float out? He sat there blinking in the sudden light.

"Message for you," said a voice.

Rusty stared. A hand reached in, gently helped him out. A paper was thrust into his hand.

He took it, read it again and again, but somehow his mind didn't take it in.

"You have the apologies of the Interplanetary Patrol!" someone said.

Rusty read the message again.

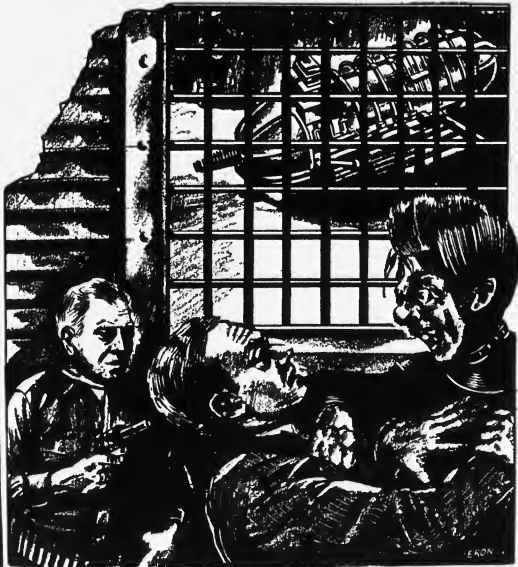
"Evidence brought by Mrs. S. K. Russell throws new light. Record just discovered in private papers of 'Skipper' Russell. Carter granted full pardon."

Signed: THE PRESIDENT.

Someone touched his arm. "The Commander requests your company for dinner."

Then a blinding light suddenly flashed in Rusty Carter's mind. "Dinner, hell!" he yelled. "Take me to the radio. I've got a story for the New York Tele-news!"





STAR PIRATE

By **FREDERICK ARNOLD KUMMER, JR.**

It meant death if Vance McClean ever returned to Ceres. Still, a cool million in palladium was tempting bait to that exiled star-pirate.

IT was cold that night, I remember. Cold and clear as ice. And although Ceres has no moon . . . it's hardly more than a satellite itself, . . . the starlight

penetrated its thin, dustless atmosphere with surprising brilliance, throwing weird shadows across the icy plain.

Gazing through the window of the little

administration building, I could see the head of the mine shaft perhaps a mile away, and the huts of the miners, all dark, for now that the rich vein of palladium was exhausted, my uncle had dismissed our workmen. The scene was a familiar one to me. I had lived on the asteroid for fifteen years and my recollections of earth, which I had left at the age of five, were hazy, a series of dream-like impressions of big buildings, green grass, and warm yellow sunlight.

I felt very lonely that evening with the workmen gone and my Uncle John at Verlis arranging for our passage to earth. Cerean Mining, Inc., had paid well these fifteen years before the vein ran out; in the huge wall-safe behind me were stacks of the gray ingots, Uncle John's profits over that period of time. Nearly a million dollars' worth in earth currency. He planned to take the precious metal back to earth with him, where its sale would bring higher prices than on Ceres, then retire on his hard-earned proceeds. He was paying my fare back to earth, gratis, and had arranged to get me a job there, which was more than many uncles would have done for a needy and lonely nephew.

I was thinking about earth, as I sat there at the office desk, my back to the big wall safe, a heavy flame gun lying on the blotter before me. I was supposed to guard the palladium until Uncle John returned, though this was a mere formality. Ceres was too small for anyone to get very far, and all the passenger liners leaving Verlis were thoroughly checked. And even supposing some thief were to overcome me, force the huge, triply-reinforced safe, he would find it hard, even in Ceres' light gravity, to carry off a million dollars' worth of palladium. So I wasn't greatly worried about playing guard; my thoughts were busy trying to visualize earth, planning what I would do there when I arrived.

About eleven o'clock, earth-time, however, I awoke with a start from my day-dreaming. A light . . . a lurid flickering light . . . was dancing through the big glassex window. I leaped to my feet, gripping the flame gun, and peered out. A sleek, silvery little space-ship was settling down on the plain outside!

As I watched the ship ride in to land on its columns of fire, a vague uneasiness

filled me. Vessels weren't accustomed to put in at the Cerean Mining field; especially swift little craft that were neither slovenly freighters nor stately liners. Gun in hand, I stepped to the door of the administration building.

THE ship had landed as lightly as a snowflake on the barren plain, switched off her rockets. The air-lock clanged open and two bulky figures in asbestos jumpers swung down; so hot was the rock from the rocket exhausts that their lead-soled gravity shoes left silvery patches as they strode toward the administration building. One of the men, to judge from his build, was a Jovian, huge, squat, mighty-thewed; the other, a slender earthman, his face hidden by the hood that protected him from the cold. I waited until they were within twenty feet of me, then raised the flame-gun.

"Stop where you are!" I said curtly. "This is private property . . . the property of the Cerean Mining Company. What do you want?"

The earthman paused, studying me as I stood there in the light that streamed from the doorway.

"So big," I heard him mutter as though to himself. "Who'd have thought it! Eleven years! It's passed quickly . . . for some."

This didn't make much sense, but it wasn't the meaning of his words that struck me. It was his voice. There was something about the voice that sounded a familiar chord in the back of my mind. For a moment I tried to puzzle out the disturbing memories but without much success. Then, shaking off the strange uneasiness, I raised the gun once more.

"Stay where you are! Another step and I'll shoot!"

The earthman continued to move toward me, the big Jovian in his wake.

"If you must shoot, Steve," he said quietly, "I suppose there's no help for it. You'd regret it, though, I think."

Again the puzzling familiarity of that voice! Where had I heard those calm, bitterly mocking tones before? And how did he know my name? Was this some trick to force an entrance into the administration building where Uncle John's fortune in palladium lay?

"You asked for it!" I cried, drawing a bead on him.

The stranger must have realized that I meant business. He was only ten feet from me, now, and could have guessed from my expression that I was about to shoot. With a swift movement he threw back the hood that concealed his face. My arm sagged down and I heard myself give a quick involuntary gasp. No mistaking those clean, sharp features, those frosty, sardonic eyes, that lined, thin mouth, lips twisted in an ironic smile! The man who stood there in the light that jetted from the doorway was my father!

IT had been eleven years since I'd seen him, but he hadn't changed much, except that his black hair was gray at the temples. Apart from that, he didn't show his forty-five years in the least. Staring at him, my memory flashed back to that night eleven years before in this same administration building. There had been three owners of Cerean Mining in those days. My father; his brother-in-law, Uncle John; and big, red-haired Carl Conroy. They had formed the partnership on earth shortly after my mother's death, come here to Ceres looking for rare palladium. They'd just scraped along for five years, then struck the rich vein of ore. And about two months after the big strike, there came that terrible night.

I was only nine at the time, and had been sent off to bed. I was awakened by the hiss of a flame-gun, a short gasping cry. I remember lying there long minutes, terrorized, then creeping to the head of the stairs, peering down. On the floor of the big room, near the safe, was Carl Conroy, a terrible blackened form, with my father bending over him. I can remember Conroy's twisted figure, the stench of burned flesh, my father's hoarse breathing. Then suddenly the door opened and my Uncle John entered, his face gray, a gun in his hand. Uncle John spoke slowly. He said that he'd noticed some of the palladium was missing every morning, and he'd asked Conroy to watch the safe. Now he knew who the thief was. My father seemed sort of stunned, choked. And I'd clung there unnoticed, hoping to wake up and find it all a dream. But it hadn't been a dream. Keeping his prisoner cov-

ered, Uncle John had backed toward the micro-wave communications set to call the authorities at Verlis. For a long moment my father stared at him, then leaped for the door. I screamed.

Uncle John could have shot him in that instant, but he didn't. He just stood there, flame-gun in hand, as my father disappeared into the darkness; then he climbed the stairs to where I crouched, crying, and put an arm about my shoulders. "We'll try to forget this, Stephen," he said to me. "There's a space-ship leaving Verlis in the morning. Maybe he can make a fresh start somewhere else in the solar system. We'll bury Conroy out here, report that he died an accidental death. That's the least I can do to keep you from being known as the son of a murderer." And I cried myself to sleep on Uncle John's shoulder.

All that eleven years ago. We'd never mentioned my father again. When people asked me, I said that he was dead. I hoped he was. The thought of having a father who was a murderer, a thief, a fugitive in the solar system, wasn't pleasant. Better to think he'd died bravely, decently, on some far-flung world. And now, after eleven years. . . !

"You remember me, then . . . son?" My father laughed ironically; he strode by me into the room, followed by the big Jovian. The latter, I noticed, carried several large cylinders on his back.

I stood there undecided, confused, fumbling with the flame-gun. My father perched himself on the edge of the table, lit a slender, aromatic Martian cigarette, an *cyla*, the same kind he'd smoked in the past. Its fragrant, sharp aroma awoke memories of my childhood. Suddenly he spoke.

"Where's Joim?"

"He's gone to Verlis, to arrange for our passage to earth. The vein's worked out."

"So that's why the miners' shacks are dark." He nodded. "I arrived just in time, then. And from the close watch you were keeping, I'd say the palladium was still here." For a long moment he eyed me, studying my face. "Healthy, and as sanctimonious as John, from the looks of you. Taon" . . . he turned to the big silent Jovian . . . "his gun!"

Before I realized what had happened,

the Jovian had snatched the flame-gun from my grasp.

"I apologize, Steve," my father said blandly, "for using force. But in my past eleven years knocking about the solar system, I've noticed that people are unaccustomed to yield to reason. It's for your own good, as well. Some years ago on Jupiter I saved Taon's life. If you were to commit an indiscretion, such as killing me, he would tear you to bits. A faithful fellow, Taon. And since I am about to force this safe, I felt that you might do something rash with that gun. . . ."

I STOOD there, speechless, as the huge Taon swung a double-cylindrical oxy-hydrogen burner from his shoulders. He tinkered for a moment with first the hydrogen flash, then the oxygen one; a moment later a jet of cruel white flame bit into the big wall-safe.

"Good Lord!" I whispered. "I've known all along that you were a thief, a murderer, but with all the solar system to prey upon, why must you come back here! To rob your own brother-in-law, after he let you escape that night! And to make sure your son is known as the son of a common thief! I'd rather have the cheapest space-rat as a father than you!"

For just a moment there was a cloud in my father's eyes, but the ironic bitter smile clung to his lips.

"Very melodramatic," he applauded. "You inherit that, I think, from the other side of the family. John has the same flair for theatrics. I regret now that the business of obtaining a space-ship, of finding certain . . . necessary persons . . . took so long. Had I come sooner, I might have aided in your education." He turned to the big Jovian. "How goes it?"

"Safe good steel," Taon grunted. "One . . . two . . . hour job."

"No hurry." My father puffed lazily at his *eyla*, flicked a bit of ash from his coat sleeve. His gestures, his well chosen words, his carefully modulated voice, all indicated that he was playing the role of debonair, cosmopolitan man of the worlds. The perfect gentleman—even when engaged in cracking a safe! I hated him for it! This space-rover, thief, murderer . . . my father! Better to see him imprisoned at Verlis, than to have him at

large, adding to the shame of our name. With one leap, I crossed the room, snapped on the micro-wave communications set.

"Cerean Mining, calling Verlis!" I snapped. "Come. . . ."

My father hardly seemed to move, but a pencil of blue flame from his gun leaped across the room, blasting the radio to bits.

"All right, Taon." He motioned back the Jovian, who, like a great faithful mastiff had sprung to his side. "No need to worry." Wiping off the gun, he turned to me. "As for you, Steve, you show more spirit than I had suspected. Although misdirected, since there was never a chance of contacting Verlis. However, I am going to pay you the compliment of putting you under lock and key while we complete our business here. In the next room, Taon, you will find, to the right of the heating unit, a closet, used, as I remember, for over-suits. Lock the boy in it."

The big man nodded, his slitted, ice-green eyes expressionless. In his grip I was helpless; no earthman can match a Jovian in strength. I shot one furious glance at my father; who was perched upon the edge of the table, swinging one foot, humming placidly. For just an instant as he felt my gaze upon him, he paused in his humming, a peculiar expression upon his face. Then Taon carried me into the next room, pushed me into the closet, slid the loose, rattling bolt. I was a prisoner—a prisoner of my own father!

FOR my first few minutes in the closet, my mind was a skein of tangled thoughts. The past that I had believed securely buried, returned to haunt me! Another day and the palladium would have been aboard a space liner at Verlis, Uncle John and I would have left Ceres for earth. All my day-dreaming of a new life on Terra was ruined. If my father should get away with the fortune in palladium, it would be broadcast over the entire solar system. Uncle John had never reported the murder of Carl Conroy, in hopes of saving my name. But this would be bound to come out, and my chances of finding a job, a decent place in society, would be wrecked when the solar system learned that I was the son of the notorious Vance McClean. And Uncle John, who had been

like a father to me since that night of Conroy's murder, would be rendered peniless after fifteen years' work! Unless I could escape, summon help. . . .

The closet was roomy and had a light. Not one of the new astra-lux arcs, but an old-fashioned electric bulb hanging from the ceiling. We don't have all the modern gadgets on Ceres.

I snapped on the light, and glanced about seeking some means of escape. On a row of nails hung several over-suits; asbestoid garments, electrically heated, for use in the biting cold of the Cerean plains. Nothing there. I then turned my attention to the door. It was of very thin, very strong plastic. Taon had not locked it, only slid home the iron bolt that fitted loosely in the brass staples. No chance, however, of working it free from this side; and while I might conceivably force the door open by battering against it, the noise would be sure to bring Taon and my father from the next room to recapture me. If any escape were made, it must be done quietly. Outside I could hear the roar of the oxy-hydrogen torch, cutting into the big wall-safe where my uncle's fortune in palladium was stored.

Then suddenly the idea struck me. A wild idea, true, but one which, if it succeeded, would enable me to draw the bolt quietly. I turned to the rear of the closet, and began working back and forth one of the nails upon which over-suits were hung. After some difficulty, it came loose. My next task was more difficult . . . stripping the wire from one of the electrically heated suits. The point of the nail aided me in ripping open the tough asbestoid. At length I obtained fully ten feet of wire and commenced wrapping it about the nail. This done, I tore loose the bulb and socket from the light, and, working in the dark, in danger of a severe shock, managed to connect the live wires to my wire-wrapped nail, forming a crude, but, I hoped, powerful magnet. But was it powerful enough to be effective through the thin, tough plastic door?

I paused, listening. The sound of the torch would cover the noise of drawing the bolt. And if I could escape unobserved, climb through one of the windows. . . . Holding my magnet against the door jamb, I moved it slowly to one side. A

faint squeak seemed to indicate that the bolt had moved. I repeated the operation again, and again, drawing the bolt a fraction of an inch each time. The little magnet, separated from the piece of iron by a quarter inch of steel-tough plastic, still had sufficient force to grip the bolt, draw it slightly. At last, after a score or more attempts, the bolt slid clear of the brass staples. A touch of my shoulder sent the door ajar. I was free!

Very cautiously I peered through the crack. The room before me was dark, but beyond the doorway at its far end I could see Uncle John's office, brilliantly lighted by the whitish flame of the oxy-hydrogen torch. My father was still seated upon the edge of the table, swinging one foot; his face was intent, far-away. He seemed to be peering into the dim mists of the past as he sat there, and I noticed that his suave, bitter mask had vanished. Taon was working on the safe. His brutish, colossal shadow was visible on the wall like that of some great grim satyr.

With infinite care I pushed open the closet door, stepped out, then slid the bolt again to make it appear that I was still a prisoner. On tiptoe I approached a window, raised it. Still no sound other than the hiss of the torch. I swung down to the ground, closed the window behind me, and ran toward the sleek silvery little space-ship.

THE ice-covered plain was bitter cold; I had neglected to put on one of the asbestoid over-suits. The deserted huts, the head of the mine shaft loomed like a row of dark specters in the wan starlight. And since the cold light of the stars was cast from different angles, double, triple and even quadruple shadows fell across the barren wastes. Bleak, desolate, to an earthman, but I was used to the cold Cerean scene. Great jagged pinnacles of rock stabbing like crooked daggers at the frosty sky; rounded meteor holes dug into the ground; occasional patches of pale ice-moss, dangling like white beards from the grotesque rocks; and beyond, the glistening plain, dropping away to a ridiculously close horizon. I gasped in the cold air as I ran, felt it bite my lungs. Without gravity shoes, I covered the distance to the ship in a dozen great bounding leaps.

No signs of life were visible aboard her and I felt that from the size of the little vessel it was unlikely she carried more of a crew than my father and Taon. If there were others aboard, I would have to take my chances.

I glanced up at the ship. Her burnished hull shone in the thin light; the heavy outer door of the circular air-lock remained open as my father had left it. I reached up, grasped the metal stanchion, drew myself into the air-lock. A moment later I had pushed open the inner door, entered the vessel.

The little ship was dimly lit, shadowy, inside. Glancing about, I found myself in a narrow companionway, one end of which led to the living quarters of the craft, the other, stretching in the direction of the control room. I turned in this latter direction, running softly to prevent my shoes from clanging on the metal floor-plates; for while the ship was silent as a tomb, I could take no chances on anyone else being aboard, surprising me.

The door to the control room, at the end of the passage, was open. For a moment, as I raced along the corridor, I had entertained thoughts of making off with the ship, leaving my father and Taon marooned on Ceres, where they would soon be tracked down. Sight of the control panel, with its complicated array of dials, gauges, and switches, soon dispelled this illusion. I had never flown a space-ship before, and any attempt on my part to do so now must surely result in disaster. But with the big ultra-wave communications set that stood to one side of the control panel it would be a simple matter to call Verlis, as I had previously attempted, and notify Uncle John.

Hastily I spun the dial to the wave length of the station at Verlis, called their letters. The voice of the operator there answered me.

"CQR, Verlis, Ceres," he snapped. "Go ahead!"

"Stephen McClean, of Cerean Mining," I whispered, bending low over the mike. "My uncle, John Gibson, is in Verlis. He'll be either at the hotel or the space-port, making arrangements for the transport of his palladium to earth. Send someone to find him at once! It's vital! Tell him" . . . I hesitated a moment, wondering

whether to mention the robbery and bring in the I. P. patrolmen. But it might be possible to stop my father's evil work without disgracing our name . . . "tell him," I went on, "that Vance McClean is here, that he'd better round up a few men and return as quickly as possible! Got it? As quickly as possible! It's urgent!"

"Right." The Verlis operator replied. "Checking back!" He repeated my message to me.

"Okay," I exclaimed. "Hurry!"

"Anything wrong?" the operator asked.

"Only a . . . family affair," I said, and snapped off the set.

The message sent, my nerves lost some of their tension. Uncle John had gone to Verlis in his big rocket-sled. With its exhausts opened full, the sled could race over the icy plain well in excess of a hundred miles an hour. And since Verlis was only a short distance away he could reach the mine, with luck, in thirty minutes.

I glanced through the big observation port of the control room. The window of the administration building was still lit by the white-hot glare of the oxy-hydrogen torch. An hour was necessary to cut through the steel doors of the safe, Taon had said. But the hour must be nearly up. I had to make sure that they didn't get away before Uncle John arrived. But how? At that moment my glance fell on the intricate control panel. If that were smashed, . . .

My eyes swept the crowded control room, fell upon a heavy metal stool, drawn up at the navigator's table. I seized it, swung it high above my head. Thrown into the panel, it was sure to wreck the array of delicate instruments. And with them smashed, the ship would be grounded here indefinitely. My muscles tensed as I prepared to heave the stool into the fragile mass of wire and glass tubing. Another moment and . . .

"Don't throw that chair!" A clear, firm feminine voice came from the doorway behind me. "Set it gently on the floor! Any tricks and I'll shoot!"

FOR just a moment I hesitated, the stool held high over my head. A woman . . . here! Then I felt the muzzle of a gun dig into my back, and I knew that whoever the woman was, she meant busi-

ness. I set the stool carefully on the floor, turned, hands raised, to face my captor.

The owner of the clear voice was young, slender, her well-modeled figure sheathed in a shining green cellatons dress. Her hair was the coppery red of a Martian desert, and her eyes were cloudy blue, the color of distant hills. The hand that held the gun was steady, her expression was determined.

"I thought I heard voices," the girl said. "Who were you talking to?"

"Only the radio." I nodded toward the set, grinning. "I called Verlis to tell them the Cerean Mining's safe is being cleaned out by my charming father."

"Your father!" The girl's figure stiffened. "Then you're Steve McClean! And you've notified your uncle to come here? Oh, you fool! You fool!" Tears of anger filled her eyes, adding rather than detracting from her beauty.

I stared at the girl, puzzled. What was she doing on this ship? And how did she know about me, about Uncle John? There was, of course, one simple explanation of her presence, but somehow I didn't like to think of it.

"Now that you've found out who I am," I said, "maybe you'll tell me your name? And your status aboard this ship?"

She didn't answer. Her lips moved, but she seemed to be talking to herself.

"Five minutes since he called Verlis; not over half an hour's run in a rocket sled." Then, squaring her shoulders. "Keep your arms raised! And head for the airlock! We're going to the administration building to warn Captain McClean!"

I had no choice with the flame-gun tightly gripped in the girl's hand. Arms raised, I stumbled from the control room, along the companionway, through the airlock. The girl walked behind me like a shadow, her face pale, deadly earnest.

Leaving the ship we set out across the bitter icy plain toward the administration building. The blue-white light no longer streamed from the window. Which meant only one thing. The great wall-safe had been forced! A million in palladium, Uncle John's life savings, were at my father's disposal! Unless that rocket-sled broke all records returning from Verlis. . . .

"Hurry up!" the girl behind me said through chattering teeth. "I'm freezing!"

I quickened my pace, bounding across the all but gravity-less plain. Snow creaked under our feet, our breaths were white clouds, our shadows sprawled like grotesque monsters on the pale ice. At length we reached the low crystalloid building; the girl's gun digging into my back, I opened the door, entered.

THE room was a scene of desolation. To one side of the safe stood the twin-cylindrical blow torch, shut off, now that its work of destruction was done. The huge door of the safe, its lock melted away, the edges of the hole glowing cherry-red, gaped wide, revealing stacks of small, steel-white ingots. Palladium . . . a million dollars' worth! Taon, the big silent Jovian, was busy taking the bars of precious metal from the safe, grunting with satisfaction as he stacked the ingots on the floor. My father, as we entered, had just taken a small, leather-bound book from the safe, was leafing through it with a queer expression on his face. On seeing us, he whirled about, gasping.

"Clare! And you, Stephen!" He turned, frowning, to the big Jovian. "This is your fault, Taon! You have done poorly! I ordered him locked up."

"Don't blame Taon," I grinned. "It wasn't his fault!"

Without a word my father strode into the next room, unbolted the closet. At sight of my home-made magnet, still dangling from its wires, he nodded blandly.

"Very good, Stephen," he said, re-entering the room. "You show signs of real ingenuity. I'm afraid I underestimated you." He glanced at me with an air of satisfaction.

"More than you think!" the girl Clare exclaimed. "We've got to hurry! He radioed John Gibson at Verlis to return at once! He put the call through before I knew he was on the ship!"

For a long minute my father remained silent, puffing at his eternal Martian *cyla*, studying the greenish clouds of smoke as though the future lay revealed in their swirling tendrils. The girl bit her lip impatiently, glanced nervously toward the door. Taon stood motionless, his broad, ugly face stolid, awaiting orders.

"I must confess," my father said at length, "that matters haven't turned out just as I had expected. I had intended to take the palladium . . . and my loving son, here . . . aboard the ship, make a quick getaway. Now, thanks to that message to Verlis, I am known to be the person responsible for the . . . ah . . . robbery, and will be pursued by the I. P. men. Moreover, there is another matter" . . . his glance fell upon the leatherbound book he had taken from the safe . . . "that has caused me unexpectedly to change my plans. I think it is wiser all around for us to remain here."

"But you can't!" the girl cried. "It's madness! He can have you arrested for murder! My father's. . ."

I never heard the rest of what she was going to say. The staccato roar of rockets, the grinding of steel brakes biting into ice, drowned out her words. A rocket-sled was screaming to a stop before the building, the flare of its exhausts flickering through the window like terrestrial lighting.

Taon stiffened, his hairy hand seeking the butt of his flame-gun. The girl went whiter still. And I drew a quick sigh of relief for the first time in the past two hours. Only my father betrayed no emotion; he sat there like an image carved from ice, that bitter, mocking smile on his lips.

With a bang the door of the building slammed open. Uncle John, tall, gaunt, bushy-browed, strode into the room, frowning.

"Good evening, John," my father said pleasantly. "We've been missing you. You're all that's needed to complete this family reunion."

"Vance! Then it was true, Stephen's message! You've nerve, coming here!" Uncle John shook his head. "Thief! Murderer! Liar! I suppose I was a fool to let you escape that night. I only did so for the honor of the family and the name of Stephen, here. And so you return to commit another robbery, to make sure your son is known as the son of a space-rat!"

"You touch me deeply, John!" my father observed dryly. "As sanctimonious as ever! Pure, honest John Gibson! Ceres' outstanding citizen!" He surged to his feet, leaned across the desk; for the sec-

ond time that night his cold, mocking mask dropped, revealing the man beneath. Eyes like glowing coals, face etched in savage lines, he stared at my uncle. "I've thought of you a great deal these eleven years! In the radium fields of that hell-planet Mercury, hunting gold in the stinking Venusian jungles, prospecting the dusty, choking deserts of Mars! And there was one thing that kept me going! The thought of this minute! A year ago I'd scraped together enough to buy the little space-yacht outside. Then I had to go to Terra, find Clare. . . ." He motioned toward the girl.

Uncle John swung about, noticing the girl for the first time as she stepped from the shadows. His face took on a drawn, tight look.

"Who is this girl?" he croaked.

"Allow me." My father waved an airy hand. "Miss Clare Conroy, daughter of the late Carl Conroy."

"Daughter of . . . ! But I didn't know he had a daughter! Why is she here?" Uncle John whirled about. "What deviltry is this? You, the murderer of her father, kidnaping the daughter. . . ."

"Not kidnaping, Mr. Gibson," Clare said quietly. "I came of my own free will."

I GASPED. This girl, Conroy's daughter! And she'd come with the man who had killed her father, to the scene of the crime, was aiding him in stealing the palladium. I felt as though I were living some mad nightmare.

My father, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying himself hugely. He stumped out his *eyla*, smiled ironically across the desk.

"You see," he said, "Clare has faith in me. She believes that after her father's death, and my own foolish flight, the partnership agreements were destroyed, leaving you, John, sole possessor of Cerean Mining. You didn't know Conroy had a daughter on earth. I was a fugitive who'd never dare go to court over my share, and Stephen knew nothing of the arrangement, and wouldn't have contested if he had. Thus Cerean Mining was yours."

"You're accusing me of robbery?" Uncle John roared, the veins of his temple standing out. "You . . . a murderer, a thief! Good Lord! You accuse me when

"I arrive to find you committing burglary!" He pointed to the blasted safe door.

"I'll admit," my father said, smiling, "that my original intention was to take two-thirds of the palladium, force Stephen aboard, and leave. With a murder charge hanging over me, I couldn't afford to take the matter of the metal to court. But now something has occurred that in my wildest dreams I hadn't hoped for. At no time did I take into account that vain, boastful streak in your character, John. You had committed an act which you thought supremely skilful, supremely clever, yet you had to play the pious, honest business man. You longed to boast of it, to tell someone, but to do so would have meant your neck. And so, bursting to recount your cleverness in gaining control of Cerean Mining, you yielded to sheer folly. You kept a diary!" My father waved toward the leather-bound book he had found in the safe.

For just an instant Uncle John remained motionless, shadows flickering over his gaunt face. Then he leaped, clutching for the book.

Quick as he had been, Taon was quicker. The big Jovian seemed to slide across the room as though on wires. His huge hand caught Uncle John, held him back as one would hold a child.

My father, who had not even blinked, flipped through the pages of the little black book.

"It was clever, John," he said serenely. "Very subtle. You heard me coming, that night, rayed Conroy, ran outside. I entered, knelt at his side. It was then, dying, that he told me of his daughter on earth. A moment later you entered, caught me supposedly red-handed. Stephen, on the stairs above, saw me kneeling beside Conroy, saw you enter. Even so, I might have had a chance in court if I hadn't lost my head, run away. Naturally you hushed the matter up, 'for the honor of the family.' You didn't want an I. P. patrol investigating the crime. The mine was in your control and you won Stephen over by not prosecuting me. It might have been wiser if you had. However, I also believe in the honor of the family. Clare and I have no wish to see you in the lethal-ray chamber. We'll take a third of the palladium apiece," he motioned toward the

heap of gray ingots, "and leave you a third. Which you don't deserve."

Eyes hollow pits, my uncle stared at the precious metal. The million he had counted on, reduced by two thirds! His bony fingers clutched his belt tightly.

"And if I refuse?" he said slowly.

"You'll be turned over to the authorities at Verlis for the murder of my father!" Clare's voice was like a silken lash.

Then suddenly Uncle John threw back his head, laughing.

"You fools!" he said. "D'you think I'd come back here alone after my beloved nephew so kindly warned me? There's plenty of room in my sled!" He raised his voice, shouting, "Scott! Carr! Help! Quick!"

At once the front door of the administration building burst open and half a dozen space-rats, denizens of the slums of Verlis, swarmed into the room, flame guns in hand. Vaguely I heard Clare scream and I dove to snatch up the gun she let drop. As I whirled to face the intruders, a bolt of blue flame leaped out, knocking the gun from my hand. Taon crouched to spring, his huge muscles standing out in ridges, but my father's quiet voice halted him.

"No good, Taon," he said quietly. "They'd only blast you to bits. I must, I think, be getting old. I should have realized he'd have men with him. Well, John," he turned to my uncle, "you win this round. Just what do you propose to do?"

"Your ship is outside," Uncle John said with an unctuous smile. "And these men of mine can handle her. I'm taking this palladium back to earth with me!"

"And us?" my father asked quietly.

"So far as Ceres knows, you will have left aboard the yacht with me. So far as Terra will know, you four contracted space-fever and were buried in the void. All heirs, claimants, to the palladium gone, leaving me sole owner. As for this diary" . . . he tossed the book onto the floor, blasted it to ashes with a beam from his flame-gun. "And now," he went on calmly, "my men will take the four of you outside, dispose of you. Buried under a few feet of ice, your bodies will certainly never be found."

CLARE'S hand fluttered to her throat. I stood there stupidly, gaping. My whole life seemed to be whirling like a pin-wheel. This cold killer, my Uncle John! My Uncle John whom I had trusted, who had been a father to me these eleven years! I felt that I should say something, do something heroic, but I could only stare. The six space-rats, their guns ready. . . . Clare's pallid face. . . . Taon, standing there like a colossal robot. All at once my father's voice broke the brittle silence.

"Come, come, John!" he said dryly. "You're being melodramatic now. Such slaughter is useless."

I watched him as he spoke. He was standing near the safe, hands behind his back, outwardly very calm, but I could see his eyes darting about the room in search of some means of escape. Uncle John must have noticed his eyes, too, for he waved the men forward.

"No chance for any of your tricks, Vance," he said harshly. "You four stand in my way and you're going to be removed! Take them out!"

Still stunned, I stumbled from the room between two of the space-rats. One of them, a half-breed with Venusian blood predominant, walked behind Clare, gun in hand. Despite her pallor she kept her chin high. Taon was stolid, emotionless as always, while my father was jaunty, careless, as though merely going for a stroll. As we passed through the door, I glanced back. Uncle John was busy picking up the ingots of palladium; he seemed to have forgotten us already. His eyes were bright with avarice, triumph, and he seemed to caress each bar of the precious stuff as he touched it. The sight filled me with sudden rage.

"You're mad!" I cried. "Mad! You can't hope to get away with this!"

He glanced up impatiently. "Hurry up with it!" he snapped, and slammed the door behind us.

Like four automatons, we crossed the icy plain. Near a jagged pinnacle of rock, on the edge of the landing field, the half-breed paused.

"As good a place as any," he grunted. "Line them up over there!"

They placed us with our backs to the rock, retreated several paces, flame-guns ready. I shot a furious look at my father.

Was he going to see us all butchered by the energy blasts without so much as a struggle? Better to go down fighting than this. And Clare . . . so young, lovely. . . . I was just flexing my muscles for a desperate leap when my father spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it would be to your credit to permit at least one of us to die happy. Now it so happens that I am addicted to the use of the Martian *eyla*. It is, I find, far superior to terrestrial tobacco, having a cheering effect not unlike benzedrine. If you would permit me to enjoy one last smoke of it, I would find my transition to another and, I hope, better world infinitely more pleasant."

The half-breed glanced questioningly at his companions, then at the little administration building across the plain.

"Come," my father said pleasantly. "Surely you won't refuse a man's last wish. It takes only eight minutes to smoke an *eyla* tube. And at the first sign of any trickery, you can shoot."

The half-breed shrugged. "Okay," he grunted.

With elaborate care my father drew one of the slim, greenish tubes from his pocket, lit it.

Quickly the minutes slipped by. The half-breed stamped his feet against the cold, glanced at the *eyla*. Only a tiny stump remained in my father's fingers.

"All right," the Venusian growled. "Let's get this over with!"

"As you wish," my father said cheerfully. He took a last puff of the tube, tossed it onto the ice, ground it out with his foot. One long glance he shot toward the lights of the administration building, shining through the gloom, then straightened up. "And now—" he murmured.

Six flame-guns swung up to face us. Taon, betraying his first signs of emotion, gazed anxiously at my father. The latter's face was tense, anxious. In another moment. . . .

AND then it happened. A blasting, thundering roar echoed across the plain! Dazed, I saw the windows of the administration building give forth a blinding flash, lighting up the ice like a magnesium flare! A sound of shattering glass, of splintering plastic reached us. The administration building was being wrecked

systematically by a mystic, unknown force!

With the explosion, the space-rats whirled toward it, instinctively. At the same instant my father plunged forward, Taon at his heels. The huge Jovian seized two of the men, crashed their heads together with a sickening crack. Limp, they fell to the ground, and Taon passed on. While the giant was thus disposing of two of our adversaries, my father had leaped upon another, borne him to the ground in a wild tangle of arms and legs.

All this in a split second, before I could collect my wits. The three remaining space-rats leaped back, gripping their guns. A flash of blue flame leaped out, scorching Taon's shoulder, but before the man could fire again the Jovian's huge fist had stretched him upon the ice. Moving forward, I saw the Venusian half-breed aim at my father who was still struggling with his first opponent. With all the force at my command I hurtled forward, deflecting his arm so that the dazzling blue bolt of flame tore up the ice, harmlessly. As I struggled with the man I saw Taon pick up his third opponent, hurl the inert form at the remaining space-rat, sending him to the ground. Then my father arose from the unconscious figure of his antagonist, dug a flame-gun into the half-breed's ribs. At once his struggles ceased; he raised his hands submissively over his head.

"Thanks, Stephen," my father drawled. "I shouldn't be here if you hadn't deflected his aim. How badly are you hurt, Taon?"

"Little burn," the Jovian rumbled. "No hurt much." He grinned as Clare ran toward us. "No die now, missy."

"Chin up" my father said, patting her shoulder. "It's all right now, child. Let's go back to the house."

As soon as our prisoners were disarmed and bound, we returned to the administration building. It was wrecked by the explosion. Doors and windows blown out, walls blackened. Inside, it was even worse. Chairs, desks, splintered, the floor littered with debris—and Uncle John, a charred and terrible figure, sprawled before the safe, one hand still clutching an ingot of palladium.

"What . . . what was it?" I whispered.

"What caused the explosion?"

"Hydrogen," my father said gravely.

"As I stood there with my hands behind my back, I opened the hydrogen valve of that oxy-hydrogen blow torch. We'd used a good bit of it to blast open the safe, but there was still plenty, under that pressure, to fill the room, unite with the oxygen already present. A gas explosion, and a powerful one."

"But," I demanded, "what caused the gases to unite? What ignited them?"

"And you've been working at these mines all these years?" he cried. "Don't you know that certain metals like platinum, or palladium, act as a catalyst? The gases are absorbed on their surface, unite. And when hydrogen and oxygen unite . . ." He stooped, picked up one of the gray ingots. "Here's what ignited that mixture! I knew I had only to stall until enough hydrogen had entered the room to create an explosion." He shrugged. "I suppose the play's ended. Now that John's gone, the metal will only be divided two ways. Half to Clare, as her father's only heir, and half to me. I'll turn my share over to you, Stephen, as recompense for any unpleasantness I may have caused you in the past. Your late uncle's rocket-sled is still outside. I'll have Taon load half the palladium aboard it and you can go to Verlis, set up as a wealthy young gentleman of leisure." He smiled, sardonically.

I stared at him. From that smiling mask his eyes were fastened upon me.

"And you, sir?" I asked.

"Me?" he seemed surprised. "I'll be taking Clare and her little fortune back to Terra. After that" . . . he shrugged again. "It'd be of no interest to you, I'm sure. Taon, take half of these ingots and put them aboard the rocket-sled outside."

"No!" I heard myself saying in a queer choked voice. "No! I . . . I'm coming with you and Clare. If you'll have me . . . Dad."

For the third time that night my father's bitter mocking mask fell from him . . . and this time for good.

"Steve!" he murmured, putting an arm about my shoulders. "Steve!"

Taon, busy picking up the gray ingots, paused, his gaze shifting from Clare to Dad to myself.

"Good!" he grinned. "Dam' good! All one family soon now! Very dam good!"

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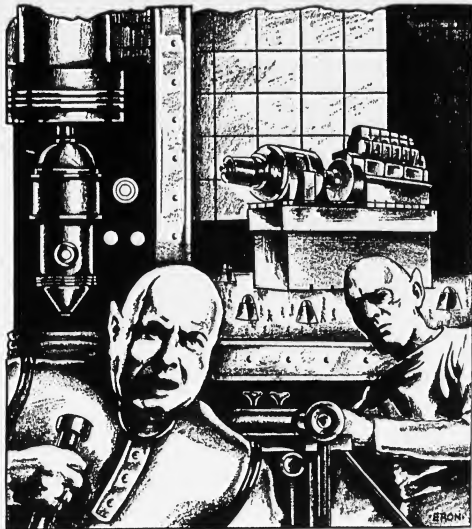
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The Cosmic Juggernaut

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No being may play God. Valno, benevolent Lord of Ixonia, tried. He tampered with Creation's basic law to avoid the cosmic chaos of a world gone wild. . . . Here is a truly momentous story; the strange record of a second Genesis.

ZIOS VALNO emerged from the darkness of the phototelescopic room with a frown on his big, ugly face. Ugly, that is, from ordinary standards; by the rest of his race he was considered rather handsome. Massively built,

his body was perched on two blocks of legs, and comprised a barrel of a chest, pillar-like neck, and the huge, intelligent head common to this entire race of Ixonians.

"Well, was I right?"

Valno came to a sudden halt in his medi-

tative walking and looked up sharply. In the midst of the weird, complex machinery that formed this master laboratory, stood Jus—the chief astronomer. His deeply sunk green eyes regarded the ruler anxiously.

"Quite right," Valno assented, still frowning. "It is of course quite unbelievable—that a distant star should break away from an unknown spot in the cosmos and start to move toward this system of ours. . . ." He shrugged. "But there it is! We must take immediate steps to protect ourselves."

In those words Valno voiced the inherent fatalism of his race, their cold, calculating scientific knowledge, their almost entire lack of fear, destroyed through years of solving the unknown. Only ignorance of the unknown can produce fear: without it, there is none.

"Protection against such a body as that will be none too simple," Jus observed gravely. "It is a high temperatured star, measures well over a million miles in diameter. In fact, it is almost the twin of our own sun. Therein we face considerable danger. Nothing we can devise in time can prevent this invader from passing close to our sun, close enough to disrupt portions of his mass. Even create a solar system . . ." he finished, pondering.

"Another one!" Valno's face took on a new expression. "But we—"

Jus smiled a little. "We know science, yes, but we do not even yet understand Nature. At any moment—even as we see now—she may decide to create another system and wipe out an old one. . . . Ours! We live in a system of five worlds, our own planet being the second nearest to the Sun. Of these five worlds only ours has life which may reasonably be called intelligent. Our Sun, at present, is only eighty million miles from us. . . . But beyond the area of our system is empty space for untold light-years, clear to the First and Second Galaxies. Do you not see that this invader, which will probably miss the orbits of our three outer worlds, will smash this one, and the one nearest the Sun, into mere rocks and asteroids?"

Valno nodded slowly. "Yes; and such an event is even more likely in view of the fact that our world is the heaviest of all, has a diameter of over 8,000 miles and ma-

terials of extreme density. Between our world and the Sun many things may happen."

"Will happen," the astronomer corrected gravely.

Valno turned slowly, still meditating. In silence he walked to the window and stared out over the sunlit mass of the super-scientific city of which he was the master. Its immense bulk was so solid, so silently eloquent of centuries of achievement and scientific progress, he could not properly bring his mind into focus with this sudden new catastrophe hurtling toward them through infinity.

"We have how long?" he asked presently, without turning.

"A year maybe; perhaps a trifle more. A year isn't going to be long enough to save us."

"I do not agree with you. In a year we can do many things. We have mechanical computators which will be able to chart out for us exactly what will occur when this invader strikes. We can know beforehand, mathematically, exactly how our system will react, which portions of our world—if any—will be torn asunder, exactly what path the invader will take on its trip, the strains and gravitational fields involved—Everything."

"True, but what good will that do us? Even a child can see that this invader will upset our Sun. How do we propose to go on living during and after such a catastrophe?"

Valno did not answer the question. He fell to thought for a while, then said, "Seventy-five per cent of stars, runaways or otherwise, possess certain radiations and emanations that definitely affect different forms of life. We proved long ago that our own life came into being through active radiations at the birth of our system. Naturally we were not present to view it—but our germ of life was born of conflicting radiations between some such invader as this and our present Sun. Through the days of heat and plasma the germ of life remained. Later it sprouted. Here again the same thing may happen, on worlds as yet unborn. If such a thing does come to pass, and we can survive this disaster, we may have the opportunity to watch an evolution. That, my friend, would be of profound interest."

"Admitted," Jus said dryly, "but you still evade the vital point. How do we survive?"

Valno considered for a space, then he smiled reassuringly.

"There will be a way, Jus; have no fear of that. While I devise a plan I want you to find out what dominating life radiations this invader possesses, then we can determine if there is a chance of future life on unknown worlds to come. While you do that I will be in the Computing Room. Give orders that I am not to be disturbed."

The astronomer nodded gravely. "Very well. I will bring you my findings the moment I am finished. I only hope you can devise a way to save us."

"There is always a way," Valno smiled, and went out.

AFTER stimulating his brain with a charge of radiations, Valno repaired to his Computing Room and locked himself in. Seating himself in a specially designed chair he fingered the switches that controlled the banks of machinery on every side of him.

Not for nothing was the Computing Room called the Brain of Ixonia. In truth it was. Machinery of bewildering complexity, all of it operating from a basis of pure mathematics, built up flawless prognostications of future time with a sureness and accuracy forbidden to a natural brain.

Actually the machinery forecasted Time, patterned the future as far ahead as desired. Nor was the process so profound as it appeared. The Ixonians firmly believed, and had proved, that Nature is not a random concurrence of atoms flung hither and yon, but an ordered pattern, a mosaic—every molecule, every Universe, fitting into its exact place. Thereby mathematically, the change of even one molecule must have predictable consequences. To this end worked the mazed, infinitely delicate machinery of the Computing Room.

Valno thrust a switch. The floodlights expired. He moved more switches, then from his almost horizontal position in the chair he was able to watch on the vast screen imbedded in the metal roof, the composite impressions of all the calculating projectors focused into one moving whole.

He saw again the basis of the whole computation—the glowing, bright invader

from the infinite deeps of space, a steadily moving swelling point amidst the First Galaxy, a point that had already the evidences of a disk. Then the machinery for accruing this known fact-basis took up the load, passed its computations on to a multiplier, which in turn mingled with the mixing device for sorting out the right predictable path amidst myriads of possible future time lines.

Valno sat immovable, watching fixedly. The invader visibly came sweeping inwards in a gigantic arc, speeded up by the machines to thousands of times the speed of light. The whole Ixonian system came into view, all five planets swinging majestically round their blue-white million and a half mile wide Sun.

Perturbations began. The conflicting gravitational fields set Ixonia and his neighbors reeling crazily. Asta, nearest the Sun, split into fragments and went careening away into the void, hurled by nameless forces. Fissures of titanic size split Ixonia from end to end.

Impassively, Valno took note of these happenings, then watched in alarmed amazement as the invading Sun, by far heavier than the normal one, took that body in its terrific momentual drive and tore away with it into space, hooked it in invisible chains.

It traveled a distance of over 4,000 million miles before it finally broke loose, but in doing so it ruptured, gave forth spouting filaments of searing matter that painted the cosmos in momentary ribbons of blinding flame. . . .

THE view switched back to Ixonia as Valno shifted a button. The planet had split in twain. One half, glowing red, had shrunk amazingly. In its close approach to the invader its satellite electrons had been stripped off by the terrific heat, condensing it by nearly a thousand miles of diameter—but the original weight was still there, packed into a dense mass that would rapidly cool with the drastic removal of the luminary.

The remaining half of Ixonia, some 4,000 miles across, had escaped condensation, and like its riven half, was reeling in a wild orbit held in the field of the remaining three scorched, but otherwise unharmed, planets.

"Worlds—to come," Valno muttered. "Eight of them—four small, four big—then one small one again of considerable weight. Half of our own Ixonia. And Asta!" He smiled wryly. "A mere far-flung group of asteroids between inner and outer worlds. So *that* is our destiny."

He fell silent again, watched for a while the flaming ball that would one day condense into the outermost planet of the new system; then shifting the controls he looked for the remaining three worlds of his own system. They were still there, their low type life gone from their burned surfaces. Only their orbits had changed—had become vastly wide round the incredibly distant Sun.

Valno switched off. The machines became silent. For several minutes he sat thinking, began to talk aloud again.

"It is conceivable that this invader is the self-same star that brought *our* system into being. On its second arrival it will bring this new system to life. What then is to prevent it coming again, and yet again? Each time wreaking havoc, dissipating its flaming energy so slowly that it can make four or five return trips before it becomes a dead star. Even then, as a neutronium mass, it can still create frightful upheavals every time it comes round. . . . An interloper that must be tamed!" he finished with decision.

Rising from the chair he went across to a smaller calculator and set a cosmic scale chart in position. Linking the machine to its huge, mechanically intelligent brothers he switched on the power and watched keenly as the tracery needle gave an exact predicted path of the interloper through space.

The needle moved through an arc, zig-zagged weirdly at the moment of its conflict with the Sun, then passed on into the depths of space. But space is finite, yet unbounded. Moving practically unimpeded through the void, its path carrying it beyond the huge gravitational pulls of the greater stars, the voyager pursued a comparatively straight path, a frictionless journey through the ether of space-time.

A straight path, and yet of necessity a circle, bringing it in time in a huge circular orbit that fell only little short of the total circumference of the universe, back to its starting point.

Valno tensed as he watched the predicted orbit; his gaze fixed on the intersecting lines. The cosmos, moving with a like speed round an imaginary universal hub, came back to the same point at identically the same time as the star. Such an occurrence could not be otherwise. Time and space move with ordered precision, repeat their order after unguessable generations. Only intelligence progresses; the order of matter remains almost the same. Matter gives place to energy; energy re-forms into matter.

"The paths cross!" Valno breathed tensely. "Unguessably far in the future! Three thousand million years!" He broke off, musing over the figure. "Exactly the same time since *our* system came into being. . . . Almost. Then genesis of life does repeat, again and again—"

HE turned sharply at a rattling on the door. Pressing a switch at his elbow he released the electrically controlled bolt. Jus came in, metallic sheets of records in his hand.

"The calculations on the invader's radiations," he said calmly, putting them down. "They react on only one composition—carbon."

Valno nodded quickly. "Never mind that for the moment; I'll go into them later. I've been busy too, Jus. . . ." He explained in detail exactly what he had seen and done. When he had finished the astronomer was serious.

"Then this interloper—to whom we might well give the name of 'Genesis'—will constantly reappear at intervals, always with the same train of disasters?" he asked.

"Unless we trap him," Valno answered broodingly. "Three thousand million years in the future he will come again. This time we are obviously too late, but on that other occasion. . . ."

"But how?" Jus demanded.

"As yet I don't know; I must think it out. For the moment there is something else I must do. I must determine at exactly what point this world of ours is going to break. One portion of it will break off into a considerable sized but dense asteroid of about 3,000 miles diameter—will form the outermost of a system of worlds as yet unborn. If that point of fracture

can in some manner be determined—"

He ceased talking suddenly and turned aside to the calculator again. Skillfully he made adjustments to the mechanism, altered its predicting mechanical core to a different ratio—that of measurements, stresses and strains, weight, mass, temperature, pressure—all the possibilities likely to assail the planet. Then he stood back and watched silently with Jus by his side as the apparatus hummed and clicked with rhythmic precision.

Fifteen minutes later it lowered wafer-thin metal sheets on long, gleaming arms, sheets that were smothered in abstruse calculations.

Valno snatched them up anxiously.

"See!" he cried eagerly. "Our world breaks asunder almost dead across the equatorial belt—one piece hurtles away from the moving Sun, and the other toward it. The one hurtling toward it is restrained from following by the gravitational pulls of the remaining planets. It is 4,000 miles wide, but loses 1,000 miles of surface area by the action of heat and condensation. It becomes plasmic and forms into a globe. The other half retains its former size of 4,000 miles diameter and is formed into a globe through the passage of ages and fairly rapid revolution.

Jus said nothing, though he nodded. He had not the remotest idea what his ruler was driving at. To him, Genesis meant the destruction of his world and the race; pre-science was not one of his strong talents.

Valno went on scanning the chart. "You observe, Jus? The condensed half is left with no revolution. It turns one face perpetually sunward, has only the very slightest libration from side to side, follows a vast orbit round the moved Sun which takes nearly three hundred years to complete. But with the half we intend to use it will be very different. The cataclysm will impart to it a revolution of some 3 hours 14 minutes, lengthening to some 10 hours before the time comes for Genesis to return. That, my friend, is ideal!"

Without giving the astronomer an opportunity to comment he turned quickly and picked up the record he had brought in, charted in the main from spectroscopic analysis.

"Reacts on carbon," he murmured. "That is not very surprising; our own life

is basically carbon. We came into being by that very process. Genesis stirred life into our world. It alone, with its peculiar radiations, was responsible for the phenomenon of life's creation, whereas life's ultimate progress is left to the less efficient stimulus of our own Sun's radiations. In itself it is not capable of producing life, only sustaining it."

"Does that help us?" asked the astronomer, rather testily.

"Not particularly," Valno answered, "but at least we may be sure that the life which will come to those other worlds will be carbon like ourselves. That means that if we are to ever restore light and warmth to our particular shattered system we shall have to steal their Sun and destroy them. That is neither just nor necessary: I have a better plan—but it can only be put into effect when Genesis makes its next trip, countless ages in the future. That is what I am counting on."

"And in the interval?"

"In the interval we shall be deep inside the uncondensed half of our world, sleeping. We shall awaken when the first radiations of returning Genesis strike the light-reaction cells we shall place near our abode. You will notice"—he picked up the record—"that here is a dominant wavelength of invisible light, evidently peculiar to Genesis and more penetrating than any possessed by the fixed stars. Maybe it is a cosmic ray; we do not know. What we do know is that it can make its presence felt on a sensitive cell long before Genesis itself is even visible in our strongest telescopes. That very fact will give us perhaps three or four years in which to prepare for its coming."

"And then?"

The ruler smiled speculatively. "Then, my friend, we set to work to trap this unwelcome visitor, bend it to our own needs, use the forces of the cosmos not only to save the life that will then be flourishing on at present unborn worlds, but also to provide our Sun-desolated system with light and heat once more."

"I still don't see—" the astronomer began helplessly, but Valno waved a hand.

"You will when the time comes. Now leave me, please, while I compute further. Tonight I will broadcast our plans to our people."

Jus hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. Silently he went out, left Valno studying the records.

"It can be done," he muttered, clenching his fist. "More— It *must* be done!"

II

WHEN nightfall had settled over the vast city, when it was ablaze with a myriad floodlights of industry and pleasure, Valno's powerful voice made itself heard in every quarter, broadcast over every radio ether line from his central headquarters.

The intellectuals heard it; so did the workers. Man, woman and child of Ixonia heard him. Some listened with interest, others with alarm; still others forsook their receiving apparatus to venture outside and stare at the coldly winging stars, pick out that solitary white invader, still little different than an ordinary star to the naked eye. This was "Genesis," they had been told. Because of it they were to sacrifice progress and contentment for millennia to come; were to suspend every activity until, if Valno's plan went through, they would awaken to a newer conquest and the snaring of this interloper who would forever threaten life until it was tamed by the forces of science.

"... and we have but a year," were Valno's concluding words, booming through every street and edifice. "In that year we shall remove all our treasures to an underground city, the building of which will commence tomorrow. Half of our world will part company with the other half but there is no reason to anticipate tragedy. Mathematical prognosticators cannot lie. All of you, workers and intellectuals, will report to me tomorrow. Normal work must cease. We are like a people facing war—war with a cosmic invader. Tomorrow we begin our defensive. For tonight—do as you will."

With that he broke the contact. The throngs of people broke up, went about their interrupted pursuits, but at sunrise they reported at Valno's headquarters in a vast multitude, without a single absentee. Loyalty, scientific progress, made them faithful to Valno no matter what personal wishes they had to forego.

He promptly assigned newly prepared

graphs to the geologists, graphs which gave to within a mile the exact point at which Ixonia would fissure when subjected to the attack of Genesis. The geologists, aided by the engineers, set about the task of finding the most suitable parts of the planet in which to sink the first shafts of the underground city. It took exactly a week. After that, progress was rapid.

Possessing machinery of infinitely advanced design, having a race wherein even a laborer was a man of high intelligence, the entire mass of people worked with a perfect coordination, gouging out one-half of their world in a series of shafts reaching down for nearly twenty miles, at the base of which superpowerful drilling machines began the more difficult work of carving out the enormous cavern which was to house an entire new underground city.

As it took shape, further armies of men and women began to denude the surface city of everything it possessed. Night and day the dozens of shaft cages came and went ceaselessly, carrying the accumulated knowledge of centuries to the new resting place.

BEHIND it all, mostly unseen but in touch with everything through X-ray television, penetrating the miles of rock, Valno and Jus kept constant watch, saw as the months passed by that they would be in time, that the life of everybody was assured.

"The rest will be simple," Valno commented in satisfaction, turning from the scanning screens. "I have already made the necessary arrangements with the engineers for the installation of the light cell devices. The city itself will be pressure, air, and light proof. Once we are all sealed within it the master valves will be controlled from our headquarters, of course. Air will be eliminated, the nearest point of pure vacua obtained, and to all intents and purposes we shall die. The rest you know."

"Suspended animation is, in truth, artificial death. Heart beats and respiration cease, but the brain, though sleeping, can immediately take up the threads and govern the body once more when air and warmth return. The light cells will do that."

"Twenty of them are being placed at varied quarters on the surface of our half

world, shielded by transparent domes. Being small, it is unlikely that all of them will be destroyed in the cataclysm. We need only one; out of twenty at least one will survive. They connect to the underground city, of course. The instant the invisible light of Genesis operates upon them on its next visit, they will transmit a signal below, actuate machines, which in turn will start up the robots who will set the air and warmth devices to work. You understand?"

"You are sure," Jus asked, "that these cells won't operate on *this* occasion and spoil everything?"

"Quite sure. They cannot become effective for at least twenty years after the cataclysm. Latent energy."

Jus smiled. "I see. It is a pity we cannot live forever and obviate the necessity of bridging the gap in time."

"Death we have still to conquer," Valno murmured. "We are doing the next best thing. When we awaken we will turn our attention to greater achievements."

He turned back to the screen and surveyed the spreading, ordered immensity it mirrored; the colossal city lit by floodlights. Work was still going on—ordered units of men and women moved ceaselessly about their appointed tasks.

And as they worked Genesis swept ever nearer and nearer through the cosmos. Already the first disturbances were becoming evident. Ixonia did not possess a great deal of ocean, but what there was began to agitate violently under the first pluckings of the new gravitational field.

Tidal waves, vast and tremendous, crashed inwards upon land that was devoid of all signs of life. The surface city was 300 miles distant from the nearest ocean—and by the time the surface disturbances reached devastating proportions even the city was empty, a deserted monument to a people of profound wisdom. The only other traces of their work lay at twenty points on the surface—stout 2-foot high domes of meshed metal glass nearly a foot thick, yet so flawlessly cast no possible radiation could experience any divergence in striking the precious alarm cell in the case beneath. Valno had left nothing to chance.

Deep down underground the powerful X-ray vision machines penetrated the

twenty miles of rock to the surface and captured a perfect image of what was transpiring there. The entire race of Ixonia watched their screens in awe-struck amazement, stupefied by the titanic forces of Nature unleashed.

TO Valno nothing he saw occasioned much surprise. It was exactly as the calculators had envisioned it. As Genesis and the Sun became opposing forces they ripped Ixonia relentlessly between their two fields of force, tore the planet in half amidst the boilings and thunderings of released inner energies. Fire, incredible bolts of electric discharge, crumbling, hurtling rocks, were the hellish lines at sunder point.

The cleavage took only ten minutes, and in that time the populated half was hurled far away from the raging suns into the comparatively cool darkness whither the other three planets had also been vomited.

The other half, flung in the opposite direction, underwent rapid and astounding changes. It glowed white hot in passing between the two luminaries, thereby escaping being pulled into either of them by almost balancing gravitational fields. But its surface was heated to a point that could only have been in millions of degrees. For a few minutes it became a veritable baby Sun—then suddenly its 4,000 mile mass compressed violently amidst a livid spurt of released energy as the satellite electrons forming the atoms of its outer crust were torn free by the furious blasting. It went reeling and swinging drunkenly on a wild orbit, clutched now in the grip of its swinging fellow planets.

Genesis, holding the Sun immovably, moved onwards, until in their mad journey they blasted the remaining planet Asta into a million splintering, hurtling rocks. Still Genesis and the Sun traveled onward, until at last the strain became beyond tolerance.

Then came cosmic birth. Writhing streamers of superheated gas ejected from the tortured Sun, born of all the hellish fury of unimaginable forces. The colossal prominences broke up into spinning, whirling globes of incandescence, hurtled across the blackness of infinity. . . . First four gigantic masses at the end of the streamer, then four smaller ones at the root.

Out and out the furthest ones went, nearly reaching the crazy orbit of the hot condensed world, but within a few million miles of it the outermost one stopped, chained even at that distance by the Sun's superior gravitation.

The inconceivable fury of birth began to lessen from that moment onwards as the flogged Sun found a new balance and position, as Genesis went spinning onwards into the infinite on its eternal path.

THE creakings and strainings in the underground city slowly abated. True to calculation the vastly thick supports and pressure resisting walls round the city had held. The entire race murmured a low sigh of relief, then attention swung to the normal television screens as Valno's resolute face suddenly appeared.

"Well, my friends, you have seen the birth of a system—seen exactly how our own system once came into being. In three thousand million years Genesis will return; the same upheavals would recur were it not for the fact that we shall master this interloper once and for all. Until then, our work is done. In six hours we shall be at rest. Prepare!"

The warning came as no surprise. The people were all ready for the decision, waiting in their homes, in the machine rooms, in the various controlling offices. They knew exactly what would happen. It would, in effect, be nothing more than sleep, but with the one difference that they would skip epochs and pick up the thread where they had dropped it.

Nothing would grow old or collapse in the way of buildings, but certain of the machinery, particularly that which relied on infinitely delicate metal, would be bound by its very nature to undergo a deterioration through such a vast spell of time. That was one of the unavoidable issues.

Valno, accompanied only by Jus, stood in the broad controlling room at headquarters. He turned to the city communicator.

"Close the valves!"

Immediately at every quarter of the city armies of laborers set to work with the switches ruling the valve engines. In an hour there was hardly a trace of atmosphere remaining. The city began to be-

come heavy with drifting excesses of carbon dioxide. Valno gave the final order. "Consume carbon dioxide. Release energy suspension machines."

From the center of the city the workers released robot attendants. They would continue to work after the flesh and blood men had fallen asleep.

Cold, biting air began to creep through the city—or so it seemed to be at first. Actually it was not air but an electric current swiftly lowering the temperature, evaporating all residue of carbon dioxide and water vapor. At the same time it performed its basic work of halting the action of the heart and brain, stilling the circulation of the blood.

One after another men and women dropped at their posts, heads reeling in infinite, giddy darkness. It penetrated everywhere with its lethal stabbing cold; its frigid, biting airlessness.

Valno dropped heavily; Jus followed suit.

In half an hour not a soul stirred, the populace lay prone in every quarter of the city, in every building, in every street. The robots alone still moved. They extinguished the lights, tested the perfection of the awakening cell apparatus, then they too returned to their posts and became rigid and silent.

Darkness—false death—closed the mighty city and its people until Genesis should return.

VALNO stirred slowly. The black abyss in which his mind had been immersed for unnumbered ages began to take on the slow stirrings of life. Memories—ambitions—plans. They floated gradually into his consciousness, built up into understandable form.

He was breathing; his heart was beating steadily. Warmth and light were around him. With an effort he opened his eyes, raised himself on one elbow. In silence he watched a small army of robots moving efficiently amongst the vast machines, busy at their tasks of controlling the air and temperature regulators.

"It seems but yesterday," he muttered. "Yet no less than three thousand million years can have elapsed. Genesis is returning."

He got up stiffly, flexed his limbs, then

returned as Jus came quietly forward. He bowed a little as beheld his ruler.

"Greetings, Valno. I have been revived now for nearly an hour. The vision screens reveal the people reviving everywhere, resuming their interrupted tasks. Many things have happened in the interval. Our plans were not entirely perfect; here and there certain machines have broken up. The sensitive inner core of our calculators, for instance. Their metal, of necessity, was extremely malleable. With the passage of time it has broken up, passed away. Then again, several inner vacuum tubes—"

Valno interrupted him. "Such occurrences are not of vital import in any case. The vacuum tubes can be repaired; so far as the calculators go, they will not be needed again. I planned everything before we passed into sleep. It is unnecessary to view the outcome of my figuring by the Computing Room machinery; figures cannot lie. Anything else?"

"Yes. There are scenes in the observatory you ought to see."

"I'll join you immediately."

Valno turned to the stimulating apparatus, absorbed a given quantum of radiations, then accompanied the astronomer through a maze of warm, brightly lit passages to the observatory. In silence Jus motioned to the mirrors of the X-ray telescope reflector. The lights dimmed. The two stood in silence, surveying the scene presented to them.

"So—eight worlds," Valno mused, gazing at the new system. "Four large and four small—and between the orbits of these inner and outer groups lies the remains of Asta—" He broke off and looked more closely. "That third world there, Jus. From its appearance it might possess life."

"It does," the astronomer stated. "I've already viewed it at close quarters. Of all these planets it is the only one with intelligence upon it. Comparatively inferior intelligence. Educated bipeds. See!"

He fingered the vast controlling switchboard, spun the calibrated wheels that altered the telescope's focus. The third world suddenly leapt swiftly from a mere clouded ball to a world of land and water, clouds drifting lazily in its atmosphere.

"You see?" Jus murmured. "Cities—"

ocean-going vessels—airplanes. Here and there traces of war, an atavistic throwback. All the attributes of a civilization of the lower order. They understand radio; our spatial radio system is successful in picking up their electromagnetic waves. Naturally, their language is peculiar."

"The Language Expert will soon interpret it," Valno answered absently, thinking. "I would rather like to know the reactions of these queer people to Genesis when it comes."

"I will attend to it, Valno. In the meantime, the present facts concerning our system are these. We are four thousand five hundred million miles from the Sun; we spin now at a revolution of ten hours twelve minutes in relation to him. We make a circuit of him in five hundred years. The other worlds of our system, the outer three, have spins between fifteen and sixteen hours. Dead, of course, so far from the Sun. Atmosphere gone. They had life of only the lowest form, and for that very reason I do not see why some life spores may not remain, deep down. They would come back to life if we can ever get solar warmth again. After all, pure interstellar space is the most perfect coffin for life spores—eternal preservation."

Valno smiled. "If my calculations are correct, my friend, we *will* have a Sun again—that wanderer Genesis will be turned to good account. In fact we have *got* to have him. We cannot forever live down here, comfortable though we are at present. Our supplies of energy cannot last that long. Besides, we are a surface people, accustomed to blue skies, the wind, the rain. I presume Genesis is still beyond telescopic range?"

"Yes; but I know where to look for him. He is visible to the spectroscopic analysers, but not to the eye."

Valno turned actively. "The moment he comes into view advise me. In the meanwhile have the Language Expert keep close check on all radio messages exchanged on the third world. Tell him to record anything he thinks important. I'm anxious to judge the intellect of these people."

Jus inclined his head, then after a final glance at the mirror Valno turned and went swiftly out.

ONCE recovery was complete throughout the underground city Valno marshaled his people into action once more, set them to work on the building of machines that were vast even within the knowledge of Ixonia. Mammoth blast furnaces began to work ceaselessly, casting the molds for machinery that was incomprehensible, save to a chosen few—and the chosen few failed to reveal anything because each of them only understood a part. Valno alone understood the whole vast project.

Most of the time he studied the behavior of the condensed half of Ixonia, watched it proceeding on its 300-year circuit of the far distant Sun, noticed the intricacies of its orbit—then he studied its relationship to rapidly twirling Ixonia. He smiled at what he saw, smiled even more when his laboratory tests revealed that Ixonia possessed almost unlimited quantities of natural electric current, begotten undoubtedly of the time when for ages it had twirled on its leisurely way in comparatively close proximity to the now removed Sun.

"Force—planet sized force and power," Valno murmured. "It only needs to be harnessed; bend the power of energy to our own uses, and then—"

He broke off, surprised from his musing by the arrival of Jus. With his usual calmness the astronomer placed the small sound recorder on the bench and switched it on.

"Here, Valno, is an interpreted record of third world communications," he remarked. "It may be of interest. I rather fancy it is some kind of astronomical talk."

He stopped speaking as the mechanical speaker suddenly operated from the metal sound track spinning on its spools.

" . . . and I say there will come a time, one day, when the very forces that brought our solar system into life will return! That is inevitable because space curves in a perfect circle. Only one thing can prevent the return of the force or the star that ejected filaments of gas from our Sun, and that is some distant catastrophe which would destroy this wanderer completely. That is a chance that can only be reckoned in multi millions to one. Stars, too, move in orbits. The universe is changeless, it constantly repeats its order. Therefore, one day, we shall need to face this grim

possibility. It may be millions of years hence; it may be only a few years. As yet no man can say.

"That such a disaster occurred in the past is now beyond all question. We have the asteroids, the remains of a world far in precedence to ours. We have Pluto, a misfit on the remote edges of our solar system—a dense world, obviously afflicted at one time by vast heat which, from the present position of the Sun, could only have occurred by the presence of a hot body from outer space. Then again, we know today that the views first put forth in 1931 by Dr. Baade are correct—Pluto is not a broken fragment or satellite of Neptune; it is the outermost world of another group of worlds beyond visual range!

"A system, my friends, that at one time had a Sun. Maybe *our* Sun. We have proof of other worlds in the presence of the strange perturbations of Neptune, outlined by Professor Lowell, and quite unaccounted for by the mere size of Pluto alone. There are other worlds—beyond! But until we achieve telescopic power strong enough, we shall never find them.

"None the less, we can be assured that at one time these worlds had warmth. Pluto alone indicates that. What happened once can happen again, though I sincerely trust it will not be in the course of Man's evolution. If it is, then it means the end of—"

WITH a click the record suddenly finished. Jus smiled as he switched the instrument off.

"There was nothing else of importance, Valno. Clearly these third world people don't know yet how deadly accurate this astronomer of theirs is; probably he does not know himself. Pluto, eh? So that is what they call the condensed half of our world. I just wonder what they'll do when Genesis becomes visible to them? Which it will be before very long. It is already visible to us because of our nearer proximity to it—"

"It is!" Valno interrupted sharply, looking up. "Then we must get to work at once, swing Pluto round to act as a snare."

Jus gazed in astonishment. "Do *what*?" he cried.

Valno looked at him seriously for a moment.

"This Pluto, as the Third Worlders call him, is practically equal in weight to our own half world here, is he not?"

"Certainly, but less in size. Contracted."

"Exactly. For that reason it can be contracted to an even smaller size, turned into a veritable tight-packed core of neutrons."

"But how? And even if you accomplished it its weight would be just the same no matter how small you made it."

"Quite so—unless a battering ram of neutrons were projected at it after it had been contracted. Then its weight would increase very rapidly without much increase in size. Am I right?"

Jus nodded in bewilderment, spread his hands. "Where do you propose to get the power necessary for such a feat?"

"I propose to use this half world of ours as a natural dynamo. I have been experimenting recently, and as I anticipated it has huge stores of natural electricity at the north magnetic pole. To this pole swarm billions of tons of nickle iron, neutronic material of which the core of any world is fashioned. Now you see? Fields of force generated by this world's natural spinning against ether, or space-time, or whatever it may be termed."

"And you propose to tap this supply of terrific energy?"

"That is what our workers have been engaged upon recently—constructing the necessary machinery. We shall be able to use this energy exactly in whatever manner we wish, have an inexhaustible supply. At will we can project a beam of pure force, or of neutrons, or of compression. Our science is easily able to accomplish that."

"I know, but do you believe that dense matter can be compressed as easily as the more rarefied state?"

Valno gave a confident smile. "Of course! In the long run dense matter is not less compressible than rarefied matter, only its compression is more jerky. The apparent incompressibility of solids and liquids is due to the fact that the ridiculously small pressures science can produce are unable to get over the first jerk. With this new new system of infinite power we shall accomplish it—place a controlling shell of energy around Pluto, then move

his as far toward approaching Genesis as possible. . . . Increase his weight until his mass is strong enough to drag Genesis aside toward him."

"Then?"

"I see nothing to stop Pluto becoming the neutronic core of Genesis. That, at least, is what my figures show."

Jus stood for a moment in silence, then he shook his head, doubtfully.

"Well, maybe you are right," he admitted, "but I would have liked it a great deal better if the Computing Room machinery had not collapsed. Then we could have seen for ourselves."

Valno laughed contemptuously. "Pessimism, Jus! Figures cannot lie. We would merely have seen what I have outlined."

THE visible reappearance of Genesis in the firmament lent a spur to the activities of the Ixonians. The high pressure work already in force was increased two-fold; every member of the race was pressed into commission for the construction of the intricate machinery Valno had devised.

As fast as it was completed he and Jus took charge of the proceedings, accompanying armies of workers up the twenty mile shafts to Ixonia's cold, airless surface, directing operations from within their transparent, air tight tractor globes, capable of mobile movement across the torn, rocky wastes that had once been fair, sun-warmed countryside.

They set up their temporary headquarters at the north magnetic Pole, which, since Ixonia revolved almost on its side, directly faced the vastly distant Sun. Here the light was equivalent to that of perhaps two full moons on Earth. Pluto, too, with his relatively high albedo, added his percentage of light, moving slowly across the star dusted sky like a distended satellite.

By degrees, directly over the north polar cap, a fantastically large projector was erected, rearing nearly 1,000 feet into the ebony dark, strengthened and supported by mammoth griders sunk deep into the rocks. . . . From it, penetrating down into the underworld city, led the myriad cables for its controls, all leading back to the special laboratory wherein were housed power magnets, transformers, incredibly complex

induction coils, rectifiers, and numberless other devices essential for the tapping of the stupendous energy stored in Ixonia's very own being.

At last Valno was satisfied, returned below with his workers. A brief interval was granted for relaxation and stimulus, then he went direct to the power laboratory, accompanied by Jus and a sprinkling of the few more important members of his race.

Upon three sides of the power room were X-ray television mirrors, all giving different aspects of the magnetic pole. One viewed the projector, another charted Pluto's movement across a graded scale; still another was able to give a vantage point of any part of the heavens.

Moving to the control board, Valno raised his hand. Instantly forty attendant workers performed their tasks. Forty multiple switches slammed into position: engines thundered suddenly into life. Ixonia quaked to its depths with the abrupt impact of nameless, devastating energy probings.

His face rigidly set, his hands flitting swiftly over the major key control board, Valno began his task, his every move checked by Jus' tense voice as he watched the small mathematical machines that balanced the figures. One tiny slip in this sudden control of elemental forces would conceivably blast Ixonia asunder or else hurl it forever into the remotest wastes of outer space.

THE din mounted; the electrical machinery became enveloped in a weird aura, a play of natural electric forces that was almost terrifying in its majestic promise of supernal power. Then, to the pre-calculated second, Valno's fingers suddenly raced across a higher set of control keys—the power note changed, was converted into an electromagnetic beam of unimaginable strength and resistance, that suddenly stabbed from the tower atop the magnetic pole and flashed out into space, invisible, traceable only by highly sensitive instruments, hurling itself directly at slowly moving Pluto.

The dense little world visibly staggered in its orbit under that sudden terrific impact from its neighbor—but only for a matter of seconds. Again the power

changed. Along the electromagnetic beam surged another energy form—a binding, gripping globe of pure force, expanding as it hurdled the gap between worlds, until by the time it had reached Pluto its distension was over 3,000 miles diameter.

Within minutes the little world was ensnared within it, like a ball inside a soap bubble. Pluto ceased to obey the control of the distant Sun and instead wavered loosely at the behest of the magnetic shackles which held it.

Slowly, straining under the colossal load it was called upon to bear, the movable head of the projector began to turn. The electromagnetic beam and Pluto moved in consequence, starting the commencement of a vast circle across the heavens.

Valno's hands dropped from the switches. He snapped automatic controllers into position and sat back with a faint smile.

"So far we have succeeded," he announced in satisfaction. "Our planet, unfortunately, has no bracing supports to hold it while Pluto makes this arc across space. Not that it will matter particularly. Our calculations show that we cannot shift more than eighty thousand miles out of position; also we have a slightly heavier weight. Down here in this reenforced underground we shall come to no conceivable harm."

"What effect do you imagine Pluto's removal is going to have on that other system?" Jus asked. "My calculations did not embody that factor."

"Hardly any effect at all. It is not a major planet like its younger giant neighbors. I doubt if its removal will even be felt, though of course it will be noticed that it is moving in the sky." Valno turned to the Language Expert. "Resume contact with the Third Worlders and notify me of their impressions."

The Expert bowed and departed. Valno looked round the humming machinery.

"While we have to wait through the weeks for Pluto to turn in an arc far enough to bring him directly in the track of Genesis, we can begin the process of rejuvenation on our surface," he said. "Firstly we need the basis of our atmosphere and new oceans—oxygen and hydrogen. Later we will add the nitrogen, argon, and other gases. Release the valves

on quarter pressure. The process must be slow and gradual."

He sat watching as the order was obeyed. The twin gases emerging from different giant storage cylinders began to filter up through the vast pipes to the surface. Once there the utter cold of space immediately froze them both into separate congelments. But by degrees, as Pluto drifted across the sky in the ether beam's grip, a solid carpet of basic atmosphere and water crept over the rocky, broken crags of Ixonia, ever expanding, held to the planet by its own gravitation.

Later, when this carpet covered the globe—perhaps a task of years at its slow, careful rate of progress—would come the other gases. Then, as Valno hoped, a free mingling under the warmth of a new Sun. A new world. . . .

FOR three months Pluto continued its traveling, crossing over from the side of the Sun to the opposite side of the heavens. Then the force beam was gradually extended, forcing the dense planet further and further away into space at constantly mounting velocity, following a course timed exactly to cross the path of approaching Genesis at a distance of 80,000,000 miles, Ixonia's former distance from the Sun before the cataclysm.

Valno and Jus watched the progress of their captive with untiring vigilance, found considerable amusement in the recorded translations of Third World broadcasts that were occasionally brought to them by the Language Expert.

"The Third Worlders have actually come to the conclusion that intelligent life is guiding the destinies of Pluto," Valno remarked with a smile, switching the machine on for Jus' benefit. "Their imagination is profounder than I thought! They will be interesting indeed to watch as they evolve. Listen to this—"

". . . and three months ago Pluto suddenly behaved like a madman's world! It ceased to continue in its normal orbit; instead it moved rapidly across the heavens and then started to recede from us! Now it is scarcely visible. It cannot be that it has been drawn by that deadly approaching star from space, otherwise other small bodies would have been affected too. Our only assumption is that life of an incred-

ibly high scientific order exists somewhere beyond Pluto.

"Yet, even if that be so, it does not make our position any the less grave. In eighteen months that fast approaching star will pass close by our Sun. Creation will repeat itself. Unimaginable disasters will overtake us! Somehow—anyhow—we have got to have protection. Descend into the earth, build shelters, do everything that can be done. . . ."

"Foolish of them," Valno murmured, switching off. "They will have no need. In any case I doubt if they could save themselves. They are a remarkably child-like lot. So far, I understand, they have only penetrated about five miles into their world, and that only after vast and primitive labor. Five miles down would certainly not afford them much protection if Genesis did attack them. But it will not."

He turned and looked into the mirrors, at the dazzling point of the invader. It had lost the blue tinge of its earlier visitation; it was yellow now. Much of its vast heat had cooled in its long journey through the depths of space. To its left, infinitely smaller, far nearer to Ixonia as yet, Pluto was slowly moving amidst the background of stars, still held in the electromagnetic beam.

"Another hour, Valno, then the contraction process may begin," Jus commented.

VALNO nodded, turned aside to the communicator and summoned his intellectuals to the power laboratory. Then with Jus by his side he made his way to it, took up his customary position at the switchboard with its triple mirrors, disconnected the robot guiding machinery and prepared himself.

"Everything in readiness?" he asked Jus, without turning.

"Everything. At Pluto's present distance of seventy million miles you may increase his gravitative field without it having any determinable effect on this planet—certainly not on the other Third World system. The only difference will be that instead of pursuing a five hundred year orbit round the existing Sun, we shall form into a new one around trapped Genesis, and of course receive the benefit of his light and warmth. Again, the vast distances separating Genesis and the other

Sun will be amply sufficient to prevent any interplay of gravitational fields. A double-sunned system is manifestly inimical to sunned life because of the erratic orbits of the planets it possesses. . . . Strange, too, that nearly all the galactic systems are infested with double-sunned systems."

"Is it?" Valno asked quietly. "If we assume that there have been other wandering stars like this, does it not seem likely that at some time or other a preponderant Sun would trap the invader, turn him into a white dwarf, and thereafter the gaseous Sun and the immensely heavy former wanderer would gravitate round one another? I do not believe that Genesis is the only wanderer; he is the first to be tamed, that's all, to be turned by scientific forces into a separate Sun. . . ."

"It's nearly time!" Jus interrupted.

Valno turned his attention back to the controls, began to finger them swiftly under Jus' quick orders. The beating rhythm of the engines changed suddenly as the shell of energy cast around Pluto began to narrow down, tightened itself into an inconceivably tough globe of power through which nothing material could possibly break.

No form of matter could stand that cramping, crushing power, steadily increasing, a vise made of elemental forces that squeezed the dead hulk of Pluto inwards and inwards upon its own core, forcing the uncounted myriads of electron orbits in its atoms to come nearer and nearer to their nuclei.

The engines whined under the increasing strain. With every yard that Pluto compressed the effort of pressure proportionately increased. But there was an infinity of power—the power of an entire planet whirling against the ether of space time.

Pluto became visibly smaller. The telescopic lenses were changed to hold it within visible range. It shrank again; once more the lenses changed. Then at last Jus gave a cry.

"That's the limit, Valno. Decreased to fifteen hundred miles from three thousand. You have a densely heavy world retaining all its original weight but only an approximate third of its original size."

Valno nodded complacently. "That's what I wanted. Now for the increase of weight. The balance-graphs are ready?"

Jus waved his hand to the delicate needles swinging in their vacuum cases. Operating from cosmic vibrations they were capable of deducing the weight of any given stellar body. At the moment the Pluto-needle was quarter of the way round the graded dial, whilst that of Genesis quivered at the exact center, giving an approximate weight of four thousand quadrillion tons, nearly balancing that of the distant Sun.

TENTATIVELY, working with infinite care, Valno began to remove the force beam, weakened it by imperceptible degrees—and, as he had calculated, contracted Pluto continued on his way by natural momentum through the non-resisting emptiness, none the less slightly altering his former course to drift more surely and steadily toward approaching Genesis.

"The converters! Neutrons!" Valno snapped.

A new group of engines started into life, adding their droning to those of the still operating electromagnetic beam. The huge laboratory became a hell of sound as the vast converters grappled with the task of supplying a beam of pure neutrons. No eye saw what was going on in those complex engines of destruction; no eye dared to behold the assault of man-tamed forces on the basic laws of matter, the tearing out of neutrons from energy streams, which were in turn hurled onto the projector's electromagnetic beam.

In untold multimillions they flung across the gulf from the magnetic pole, slammed into tiny drifting Pluto in a battering ram. Others, drifting in space in invisible swarms, joined company, piled their incredibly heavy masses on the contracted world. Weight equaling that of sixty million tons to the cubic inch passed clean through Pluto's matter and went down into his core. His weight began to increase by leaps and bounds as his core became filled with ever increasing matter possessing no atomic space whatever.

Genesis, now no more than 5,000,000 miles distant from the snarer—not far as cosmic distances go—was already beginning to feel the gravitational fields reaching out toward him. His speed, by no means as fast on this occasion as on his earlier visit, was slowing slightly; he was

moving a little to one side toward advancing Pluto.

Another hour passed. Pluto's weight was three quarters that of Genesis. Not a human sound was heard in the laboratory. Every face was a mask of intense strain, of watching and waiting for the consummation of this audacious effort to tame rampant Nature.

"In another hour and a half they will come into collision," Jus muttered tensely. "When that happens there will either be an effect of a double Sun, with Genesis going around Pluto, or else Pluto will become the core of Genesis by reason of his immensely dense material being absorbed by him."

"That is what I anticipate," Valno acknowledged. "Unfortunately, as you know, the Computing Room machinery is completely useless. Therefore we do not know in advance what will transpire—but figures cannot lie," he finished with confidence. "They are bound to give the correct result."

"But sometimes even the result has far-reaching after effects," Jus murmured, frowning. "For some reason, I am uneasy."

Valno shrugged indifferently and glanced across at the Pluto balance-graph. It balanced; the weight of Pluto and Genesis were equal. He quickly issued instructions and the neutronic stream was cut off. The energy beam returned, again held Pluto in its grip, guiding it inevitably so there could not be the slightest chance of it missing Genesis by the barest margin.

Jus watched the screens, brooding. He watched the viciously bright globe of Genesis as he swung far out of his appointed course toward the far smaller, faintly gleaming heavy mass of Pluto.

"Even if there were some mistake," he murmured uneasily; "even if the impact were insufficient to halt Genesis and he went onwards through space, he would not again cross our path. His orbit has been forever changed. Pluto has pulled him to one side."

"Absurd thought!" Valno snapped, without turning. "There can be no mistake. Genesis will be our Sun; that is the purpose of our entire struggle. That, and to save the childish Third Worlders from absolute disaster."

Silence fell again, save for the droning engines. In the mirrors it was distinctly possible now to behold vast streaming tides of gaseous matter rising from the Plutonian side of Genesis. The attractive field was tearing savagely at his photosphere.

A frown crossed Valno's lofty brow. "Strange! Can it be—*another* solar system?" he asked quickly. "I had reckoned that the speed of approach would prevent such an occurrence—"

He stopped, staring blankly. Jus joined him. A titanic arm of incandescent flame spouted from Genesis, broke close to the surface, went whirling off in globes of superheated gas.

"More worlds to come," Jus breathed. "Creation has repeated itself for all your calculations, Valno. Before Genesis has been able to strike Pluto a system has been born—a system which may one day—"

He broke off and gripped the ruler's arm tightly. Pluto and Genesis were almost in coincidence . . . the distance between them shrank to zero. They collided—and with that collision something happened.

Genesis did not close round Pluto! It did not turn it instantly into an unthinkable heavy core of flaring, dense material; instead the wandering interloper exploded into a myriad blinding pieces that hurled themselves madly on all sides of the infinite.

VALNO leapt to his feet in horror. "Shattered!" he screamed. "Our intended Sun blown into fragments—fragments to become dead hulks of the future. Oh, why did this have to happen? Why did I not foresee that the hurtling of Pluto into that body would cause such an uprush of interior matter as to stop Genesis holding together? The speed; the sudden change in temperature as ice-cold Pluto plunged. . . ."

He stopped, looking bleakly round the laboratory, listened to the now uselessly humming engines of the electro magnetic beam. In those few seconds all the strength seemed to go out of him.

"I failed," he muttered, bowing his head. "I—failed!"

"Not entirely," Jus said quietly. "Your figuring was superb; you calculated every—"

thing right up to the moment of impact. Beyond that you could not figure. Only the Computing Room machinery could have done that. The result. . . . Well! He shrugged significantly.

Valno looked at him steadily. "At least we saved that other system," he said in a low voice. "We've destroyed the interloper forever—but we have not given ourselves a Sun and surface life. All we can do is to go on living below. Those shattered fragments will become innumerable asteroids. That other system born of Genesis will never contain life; it is too far from any source of warmth."

He turned wearily from the control board and surveyed the vast sea of despondent faces around him. Then suddenly he looked up sharply at a sudden intrusive note clearly audible above the engines; the sound of a mighty thunderous roaring from somewhere above.

He twirled in surprise; then Jus shouted, "Look, Valno! Look!"

He jabbed a finger at the mirrors. They were glaring—eye-searing with brilliant fire. The projector tower had utterly vanished. In its place was a roaring fountain of staggering flame.

The thundering increased. The laboratory began to quake. Shouts of panic dinned above it.

"What's—what's happened?" Jus demanded helplessly.

Valno took a grip on himself. "The basic materials of our oceans and atmosphere," he muttered bitterly. "The oxygen and hydrogen, frozen up there on the surface. No trace of other gases as yet; that was to come later. The vibrations of heat from that terrific explosion in space somehow passed down our electromagnetic beam, ignited the oxygen and hydrogen,

helped by the water vapor from our outlet ventilation shafts. Our planet is on fire!" he finished desperately, his voice rising. "Biting down through the rocks, down the gas shafts, down here. . . . To us!"

He could make himself heard no longer. The laboratory was a jammed mass of struggling figures. Science, dignity, years of defeating fear, went to the winds. The whole planet was in the grip of devouring flame.

Jus twirled round from the panic-stricken, stampeding mob and clutched his ruler by the arm.

"Valno, listen to me! Do something. There must be some way out of this! There must—"

"There is none," Valno answered him, shrugging resignedly. "In a few minutes the remaining traces of oxygen and hydrogen, frozen into innumerable sub-surface cracks and crevices, will ignite. Then—"

He stopped talking and wheeled about as a fountain of white fire roared from the oxygen and hydrogen tanks. A split second and they spewed outwards in a deluge of shattered metal. Flame spouted into the laboratory, transformed it into an inferno, seized on the countless inflammable chemicals in their containers by the walls.

"So it ends," Valno said. "I—I can imagine those childish Third Worlders jumping for joy because they're saved. I can imagine them wondering what has brought a new star into being, wondering even more when it flickers out. Imagine them trying to discover whither Pluto went—"

He broke off and turned sharply so he might not see the shattering flame hurtling toward him—

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WRITE

LESTER L. SARGENT, 1115 K St., N. W., WASHINGTON, D. C.

Registered Patent Attorney

Asteroid H277-Plus

By HARRY WALTON

JON AKARS, petty officer of the Sun Line freighter *Cinnabar*, backed away from the jimmied manifold of the air circulators and hastily felt for the emergency mask at his belt. Any moment now the Venusian *kui-knor* he had filched from the ship's medicine cabinet and dropped into the circulators would take effect. Without warning men would drop at their posts, apparently insensible, rigid of muscle, eyes staring fixedly. Actually, they would be keenly aware of everything about them, their senses sharpened rather than dulled by the drug. But it was no part of Akars' plans to be one of them. He strapped on the mask, and, at the sound of approaching footsteps, shrank back into the shadows of the machines.

An officer peered into the circulator chamber for an instant, then marched on down the corridor. Akars chuckled. Box Jordan was part of his plan; in a way, he had a star role. But not an enviable one. Nor, to be sure, were the remainder of the *Cinnabar's* crew going to be particularly lucky. The luck of the scheme was reserved for Akars himself, and it involved four kilos of precious Urulium which Box Jordan had unearthed during an emergency landing on an unexplored planetoid. Jordan had been fool enough to turn the stuff over as a ship's prize, to be equally divided. But with the metal on board, it was inevitable that a smarter man would see and grasp the chance that was offered. Akars was that man.

He waited until the circulation meters told him that the *kui-knor* had been diffused through every cubic foot of air in the ship, then softly trod the steelene-walled corridor back to the navigating compartment. The sight there was a gruesome one. Captain Cardigan was slumped over the chart table, glassy-eyed, to all appearance dead. But he wasn't dead, Akars knew. The captain and the chief petty officer and the second navigator and the supercargo—all sprawled in grotesque attitudes about the compartment, all staring vacantly into space, were in the grip of an artificially induced coma.

Deliberately Akars walked over and kicked Captain Cardigan in the chest. Cardigan's face remained impassive, the eyes expressionless, yet there was a barely perceptible quiver that told the blow had hurt. Akars grinned and landed another, then scowled and rubbed his ear with the back of a hairy hand. It was the first navigator, Box Jordan, whom he owed a special grudge. He'd nursed special ideas for Jordan, the agony of broken bones, of a merciless beating, before death should wipe him out. But Jordan wasn't here.

Built into the chart table was the fire-proof compartment that held the ship's log. Akars removed the bulky volume, opened it upon the table, and ripped out the last four page entries, crumpling the thin metallic foil before throwing it to the floor. With the log would perish all records of the Urulium find; if any spaceman's notes or diary held mention of it the *Cinnabar's* fate would destroy that also.

Akars moved toward the control board, grasped the refrigeration controls, swung them to "off." Immediately alarm bells clanged warning. He could feel the horror which his act engendered in the men who helplessly watched it—something of that horror chilled even him. For without refrigeration the fuel tanks would quickly warm up. The compressed gaseous fuel, held inert only by refrigeration, would spontaneously explode. The *Cinnabar*, by that simple movement of two levers, was doomed.

THE alarm bells echoed madly about him as he left the navigation compartment and walked further aft, to the stern deck where the ship's tender nestled against her hull. An airtight telescoping tube connected parent ship and life ship, and Akars saw that the manhole cover was slid aside. Someone was either in the tender or had just left it—perhaps one of the spacemen now lying beside the manhole—on a routine maintenance job.

Akars climbed the short ladder into the life ship's tiny control compartment. Lamps were burning, but there was nobody



It was a pretty web that Akars spun aboard the Sun-freighter *Cinnabar*. . . . Mass murder and piracy! But he wasn't clever enough to allow for the innocent-sounding asteroid charted as "H277—Plus."

in the compartment, nor in the little vessel's supply compartment, engine room, or ilving quarters. Satisfied, Akars checked food stores, fuel and air gauges with keen satisfaction. Everything was in perfect order. His scheme couldn't fail. Only a fool would have let a chance like this slip by.

Then, thinking of Jordan again, Akars cursed. The lean, red-headed first navigator had been poison to him ever since joining the ship. Jordan hadn't been afraid of him. Other officers had excused or over-looked badly done or neglected work—Box Jordan never. The red-head had tongue-lashed Akars too often, and Akars had promised himself a meeting with Jordan—Jordan helpless, paralyzed, but fully conscious and able to feel every blow that fury could inflict. Now it seemed he was to be cheated of that.

The clanging alarm reminded him that time was dangerously short. Soon the tanks would let go; he couldn't afford to be near the doomed freighter when the exploding fuel did its work. Without glancing back, he shut the entrance port, pressed the button that collapsed the escape tube, and took his place at the glowing controls of the little vessel.

The *Cinnabar's* death knell was muffled now. Like a tocsin of the dead, it rang dully in his ears as he reached for the levers. But confidence returned as he felt the familiar handles beneath him. The life ship was complete, self-sufficient. Charts were reduced to a simple form, instruments were direct-reading, course plotting almost automatic, so that the commonest spaceman could navigate the tender at need. He had himself operated it during the *Cinnabar's* emergency landing a month ago.

He punched the internal-combustion engines into life, watched the generator output mount, then cut in a weak repulsion field. With a lurch the little ship tore free from its parent vessel and retreated from the long, gleaming shape of the freighter. He switched over to the space-induction field coils. Power thrummed in the depths of the tiny craft; it swerved about and obediently plunged ahead, fleeing the coming tragedy. After ten minutes at full field he turned it around and held it motionless in space with respect to the now distant *Cinnabar*.

The slim freighter, gleaming gold in the light of the distant sun, seemed to float upon a soft, star-sprinkled darkness. There was no trace of movement, although she was still flying, with untended engines, at three-quarters field. He bit his lips, waiting. Then, soundlessly, catastrophe struck!

FROM amidships flowered a terrible, consuming blossom of blue-white flame, a petalled fire that engulfed the *Cinnabar* from bow to stern and limned itself fantastically against the velvet heavens behind. Streamers of white-hot gas, sunlike in intensity, burst and flared in the brief glory of destruction, then as swiftly collapsed upon themselves, dimmed to the lesser glow of molten metal. The *Cinnabar*, a slender, white-hot needle, broke into a thousand dripping fragments, droplets of fire spattering the sky.

Akars chuckled uneasily, swore, rubbed his ear with the back of a hand. That was that. Somewhere in the swirling, far-flung wreckage he must find the tiny block of unbelievably heavy, practically indestructible Urulium, flung out of the shattered strong room which he could have penetrated in no other way. The explosion should have released the treasure and wiped out all evidence against him at the same time. Like the rest of his plan it was simple, direct, foolproof.

He flung the little tender back through space toward the glowing debris which now milled about itself, spinning about a common center. A few fragments had ripped free from the gravitational whirlpool of the rest. He dodged a piece half as large as the life ship itself. Red hot still, it swept past the port, more like a blazing meteor than anything made by man. Past other wreckage he swept, evidence of the terrific energy of spontaneously exploded fuel—gruesome human debris as well as that of the *Cinnabar* itself. The temperature within the tender climbed slowly as it absorbed heat from glowing fragments outside. Uneasily he checked his own fuel refrigerator, turned thermostat controls to maintain a lower temperature.

Something swept into his field of vision with startling speed. He ripped the helm over, swearing in sudden panic. The tender

swerved, but not sharply enough. A grating shock, a metallic crash, told that the vessel had been hit. The jar of the concussion almost threw him from the control seat.

His temples throbbing madly, Akars waited for the dread hiss of escaping air, the drop in pressure which his ear drums would quickly detect. The tender was small; a gash in the hull plates would empty it of air rapidly.

But the pressure remained normal, and he relaxed at last, certain that the collision had done no more than dent the hull plates. He forgot the incident upon spying what had been the strong room door. Cautiously he worked the tender alongside it, scanning nearby debris closely.

It took him fifteen minutes to find the thick-walled copper casket containing the treasure, scarred by impact, half fused by the terrific heat even though it had been protected by the walls of the strong room from the brunt of it. He knew that its precious contents could have suffered no harm, and carefully manipulated the ship's grappling mechanism until the casket was safely inside the tender's loading port. He swung the life ship about and drove for clear space.

So easy it had been! A few minutes of effort had won him ten times as much as other men earned during a lifetime of hard, dangerous work in the space-lanes. Lucky he wasn't squeamish by nature. This way he was safe. Every witness against him was dead. His own word would be taken as gospel truth. Already he had planned every detail of the story—how he had been on routine inspection of the tender when the explosion started forward, in the fuel tanks. How the life ship, with him aboard, had been blown free by the blast—how he had barely managed to close the port in time to escape suffocation—how from the tender he had witnessed the destruction of the *Cinnabar*, and how—a touching detail this—he had cruised back into the wreckage in search of survivors, but found none. He would not try to explain the explosion. The lethally dangerous nature of the fuel would answer all doubts. Nobody could suspect him.

Just before landing he would transfer the Urulium to his own duffle bag—a new one, of course, stocked with clothing taken

from the tender's supplies. A welding torch would reduce the copper casket to a lump of reddish metal. He would dispose of a little Urulium illegally, outfit a one-man ship with the proceeds, and go on a prospecting cruise from which he could return with a legitimate store of the precious stuff. Disposed of to the Martians, who valued it as a healing agent, the four kilograms would bring a fortune.

HE pushed the little ship to top speed, which was slow at best. Hour after hour he hurled its silvery nose toward the distant stars, on a course which his charts told him led to earth. Mars, smaller than his own world, was on the other side of the sun. It was on earth that automatic cameras would have snapped the explosion of the *Cinnabar*. Perhaps salvage ships were already on their way; in a few hours he might meet them.

Glancing at the chronometer, he saw that it was safe to remove his mask. The last vestige of *kui-knor* which might have entered the tender from the *Cinnabar* would have decomposed by now. By this time it would also have decomposed in the blood of the drugged men had any remained alive to experience it.

"Akars! Blast my orbit, what happened?"

He whirled at the voice, all his fear surging up within him, choking him. In the doorway stood Box Jordan, his tall, lean figure swaying a little, keen eyes questioning.

"Jordan! I—where d'you come from?"

"Routine inspection forward. I was checking the fuel tanks, started to back out of the tank compartment when I froze up. Couldn't move a toe." The navigator's sharp eyes narrowed. "What happened?"

"Happened?" Akars fought the panic in his voice, the fear of this man who was not afraid of him. "Nothing much—just that the *Cinnabar* blew up."

"Blew up! You mean we're the only survivors?"

Akars shrugged. "I thought I was, until you popped up. Of course I looked around. There wasn't anybody else—" He stood up, stretching. "If you'll take over a while, I'll get the kinks out of me."

For an instant Jordan hesitated. Akars watched him closely. He suspected, of

course—knew that he had been drugged. Even when under the *kui-knor*, he must have felt the tender pull away from the *Cinnabar*, and that without any evidence of an explosion. In a moment he would add things up, reaching the only possible conclusion. Desperately Akars glanced about for a weapon.

And Jordan, with a queer twisted smile, walked forward—not toward the pilot's seat, but toward Akars. Those big bony hands of his were working. His very silence was terrible.

Akars flattened himself against a wall. Big as he was, he knew himself to be no match for the hard-muscled first navigator. Aroused as the latter now was, he would be doubly dangerous. Akars clawed the bare wall, breathing hard.

"You drugged the air-cycle," said Jordan. "You shut off the refrigerators and took off in the tender. You stood by while the *Cinnabar* went to hell, with every man aboard her. Then you went back and picked up the Urulium—"

"No!" screamed Akars. "No! I swear I didn't—"

Jordan's hard fingers closed over his windpipe, crushed in his throat like a steel clamp tightened about it. He could feel his eyes bulging from their sockets, his body turning cold and dwindling away from him.

He slumped suddenly, as though unconscious. A moment longer Jordan held him in that terrible grip, then flung him away. Akars hit the wall, collapsed into a huddled heap, gasping and retching as breath passed his bruised throat. He took his time, gathering strength, sure that Jordan would not attack him while he was down. Desperation lent him courage. Concerned, there was nothing to do but fight it out. He wouldn't let the navigator get another throat hold.

Pretending to be weaker than he was, Akars lurched to his feet. He had a plan now, and warily circled Jordan before closing in. Then he plunged forward, ducked a swift uppercut, took a solid body blow that left him gasping—but reached the wall behind Jordan which was his objective. A rack of oxygen tanks for use with space suits was fastened there. Akar's hands tore one free—a slender, blunt-ended cylinder, massive enough to be a dangerous

club. As Jordan closed in Akars brought it down on the navigator's left arm, which fell limp. With a bellow of triumph Akars struck for the head.

Jordan, still drug-hazy and crippled in one arm, took the blow on a temple. It stopped him like a shot; he crumpled to one knee and fell. Breath rattling in his swollen throat, Akars stared into the hated face and wondered whether he should finish the job with a few more blows. Caution whispered consent, but still he hesitated. This was Box Jordan. *Box Jordan!* Why kill him like this? He wanted Jordan to know what was coming—to know it as long as possible.

It struck him then that killing Jordan wasn't as simple as it seemed. Found aboard the tender, Jordan's body would convict him. Flung into space, this far from the *Cinnabar* disaster, it would provoke awkward questions—unanswerable questions—when discovered. Here was an unexpected flaw in a scheme that had looked foolproof! Cursing, Akars pulled the chart book toward him.

HE had tied Jordan's feet and fastened his hands behind him, lashed to a wall railing. In a supply closet he had found a paralysis gun, which he now wore in a side holster. For these and other reason he was as confident, when Jordan showed signs of returning life, as he had been at first. Grinning, he watched the navigator stir and weakly sit up.

"Coming out of it, are you? Listen to me, Jordan. I've got the Urilium aboard. Want to come in on this with me?"

Jordan rubbed his temple tenderly. "I suppose there isn't much choice—"

Akars chuckled. "You'll come in, huh? And spill the first chance you get. I'd be asking for the mercury mines if I took you back. Skip it, Jordan. I was kidding."

"So was I." The navigator smiled crookedly. "But when it comes to teaming up with a rat, I'm ashamed of myself for even kidding about it."

Akars struck out—a hard flat hand blow that rocked Jordan's head and left red welts on his cheek. "You know what? I've got your spot picked out. Nice and cool. No air, except what'll be in your suit tank. And about as much chance of rescue as an ice cube in hell—"

He picked up the chart book and with ruffled brow turned its alumin-foil pages, his tongue between his lips. The page found, he held it before Jordan.

"See that? A dinky space-apple, that's been passed up by every claiming bureau in the system. Ten miles through. Just big enough to keep you from drifting free where a nosy patrolship might find you. It's the nearest asteroid—I'd dump you on Pluto if it weren't out of my way."

"Asteroid H277 plus," read Jordan calmly. "Not exactly exciting. Why not ray me here and chuck out the remains?"

Akars swore. "Because you're supposed to be with what's left of the *Cinnabar*—damn you. I can't take you back there—salvage ships may be out by now. And I can't throw you out where you may be picked up by a patrol. I've got to ditch you where you'll stay put—"

"So it's H277 plus for me?" murmured Jordan. "The plus part of it sounds interesting. What does it mean, Akars?"

"How the hell would I know? And what do you care? You won't live long enough to worry about it."

But Akars himself was worrying as the asteroid floated into sight. He'd had to go off-course to reach it, when he should be making a bee-line for earth. There was a slight chance that the tender might be observed stopping here—a risk he had to take, but which could be minimized by haste. To cut the time shorter he'd let Jordan wear a space suit and walk out of the airlock. That would save time. Otherwise, if he killed Jordan on board, there would be some delay while he disposed of the body. Besides, there was a savage satisfaction in marooning the navigator alive, in letting him live out those last hopeless hours in slow torture of body and mind. Akars himself shuddered as he thought of it—the fate reserved for murderers taken aboard ship. A ten hour tank of oxygen—and a barren island of the sky such as this.

ASTEROID H277 plus was a bleak lump of pitted rock, roughly oval in shape, gleaming where the sunlight fell, pitch-black in the shadows. No ship would ever come close enough to it to make out a man's body, even if it lay in the light. In fact, space-ships avoided such masses as

this just as the ancient steamers avoided icebergs. The chance of rescue was practically non-existent.

"Almost there, aren't we?" asked Jordan from the floor. "What do I do—a swan dive from the emergency lock?"

Akars shut off power, held the tender immovable by a weak repulsion field, and freed the navigator's feet.

"You get in a suit—and don't try any tricks or I'll beam you." He watched sharply as Jordan meekly obeyed and climbed into the stiff canvas garment. Akars set the helmet over his head and fastened the rim studs, tearing off the collar bridge bearing the legend "*SS Cinnabar*."

"If you ever are found, you won't be recognized. They say a body loses heat slowly enough for decomposition to make a good start, in one of these suits. When we land, you close your face plate and go out through the lock."

He watched Jordan narrowly as he jockeyed the ship closer to the tiny asteroid. Without knowing why, he was uneasy. Jordan was a fighter. Funny he'd go out like this, the hard way, without a scrap. But what could he do? If he didn't march out of the lock under his own power, Akars could beam him and throw him out through the loading port.

Asteroid H277 plus swam up to meet the ship. Akars picked his landing spot and reduced his repulsion field carefully. The ship settled. Jordan seemed to stiffen expectantly. Akars lifted the paralysis gun from its holster.

Directly beneath the basalt blackness of the asteroid shimmered oddly with a strange translucent light. Akars swore softly. There couldn't be anything down there. A trick of the sunlight—perhaps the shadow of the ship? But it was queer. Maybe he shouldn't land—just make Jordan jump from the ship. That was it.

His eyes flickered to the navigator, stiff as a ramrod now, with that tense air of waiting for something to happen. Akars tightened his grip on the gun, jerked his eyes back to the asteroid—and froze with fear.

From the basalt surface leaped a fountain of fire—cold leaping fire licking upward at the ship. He jerked the controls over to full repulsion, screamed in terror

as the ship dipped further instead of rising. An electrical flame sprang to meet it—a snapping, snarling fury of saw-edged lightning. Incredulously he saw it leave the prow of the vessel, flicker back to strike white flame from the hull plates just over the fuel tanks forward.

A muffled roar beat upon his ears. Flame billowed forth before the pilot glass. The ship trembled and shuddered to the force of unleashed gases; acrid fumes swirled over the control board and seeped from the very floor plates beneath his feet. Through drifting smoke he saw the deck curl back, white hot, and drift lazily out of sight like a burnt leaf. His ear drums snapped as air fled into space. Vaguely he saw the black surface of the asteroid fly upward, felt a crunch and crash of metal as it exploded in his face, and fell through senseless darkness. . . .

“SO you're alive?”

It was Box Jordan's voice, Akars realized as he awoke to painful consciousness. Parts of him seemed to be on fire. He was wearing a space suit, as Jordan was, and they were no longer in the ship, but on the asteroid.

“Hard time getting you into a suit when the ship's air went,” remarked the navigator, his voice loud in Akars' earphones. “Of course I knew what was coming and had only to close my face plate, just as you told me. But I wanted to save you particularly. They need good, tough murderers like you at the mines. Some last as long as five years, I hear.”

Akars tried to sit up, discovered that he was bound—and that Jordan had the paralysis gun now.

“I found the Urulium,” continued the navigator. “The *Cinnabar's* widows and orphans will get their share, after all.”

“What happened?” asked Akars thickly. “That explosion—”

“Only a feeble imitation of the *Cinnabar's*. Don't forget that her fuel exploded spontaneously—with a thousand times the force. In our case the fuel was inert, because our refrigeration didn't fail. It *burnt*, once ignited, but without an explosion—just as I expected. What I didn't tell you, Akars, was that the collision you had near the wrecked *Cinnabar* knocked a

hole in one fuel tank. I was lying almost against it—almost froze, too—and for hours I could hear fuel leaking out through the rip. Not much—just enough to catch fire when that spark hit us, and to carry back and ignite the whole tank.”

Akars groaned. “That spark—that damn spark!”

Jordan was staring into space. He rose and looked long, then sat down again.

“We're rescued, Akars. Naturally the salvage ships kept a lookout for the missing life ship and saw the flare-up here. They'll arrive soon.”

“That spark!” groaned Akars. “What the devil was it?”

“That was what you weren't interested in, Akars. The ‘plus’ of H277 plus. Did you know that the earth and most planets are negatively charged—have a surplus of electrons? And that our ships are also negatively charged—in fact super-charged because of the driving fields we use? A planetoid or asteroid with a simple name or number is also negative and no precautions are necessary. But a ‘plus’ following the designation means it is positively charged, whether because of interacting gravitational fields, internal radio-activity, or induction between the body and an atmosphere or some other reason. When an accredited navigator has to land on a ‘plus’ body he orders a careful check of all fuel tanks, because he knows there will be a heavy electrical discharge between it and the ship just before landing. But you didn't know that—

“Another thing you didn't know, being a petty and not a commissioned officer, is that a new I.T.C. ruling requires an exact duplicate of the ship's log to be kept aboard life tenders at all times. Just before I went back to the tanks I replaced that duplicate log book. You took it along, Akars, and I found it when I found the Urulium, safe and sound in its fireproof case. That's what will convict you, Akars—not my words, but the story of the Urulium find and my turning it over as a ship's prize, written and signed by Captain Cardigan himself. The I.T.C. would have found that duplicate log anyhow, Akars. You never really had a chance to get away with it. Funny, isn't it? Funny how dumb a smart guy can be, . . .”

Life on Other Planets?

By **EDWARD PODOLSKY**

Is any world other than Earth capable of sustaining life? Scraps of irrefutable testimony seem to indicate that some can—and do!

MANY years ago a curious stone resembling a meteorite fell into the Valley of the Yaqui, in Mexico, and a sensational story spread over the country to the effect that a stone bearing human inscriptions had come down from the sky. Even more curious than this was the discovery, in 1851, of a piece of auriferous quartz, about the size of a man's fist. When the scientist, who had been examining the strange stone accidentally dropped it, it split open and a nail was found in it! Yet again, during a violent storm, in 1887, a small stone fell from the sky at Tarbes, France. It was 13 millimeters in diameter, 5 millimeters thick, and weighed two grams. The object had been cut and shaped by means similar to human hands and human intelligence.

Those who, at the present time, contend that there is life on other planets base their belief on conclusions arrived at through the agency of the microscope and spectroscope. Meteors, for instance, which have come to the earth's surface have been subjected to the most exacting microscopic as well as chemical analysis. Under the microscope, particularly, they have revealed the mineralized forms of such lower animals as the crinoids (to which family the star-fish and sea-urchin belong) and corals and sponges.

Not only have these aerolites revealed the existence of lower forms of life on other planets, but peat and coal, as well, have been found. And further still, chemical scrutiny has revealed water and even oxygen on some of these meteors.

ONE of the most interesting of these meteors fell near Knyahinya, Hungary. It weighed 550 pounds and is now in the Vienna National Museum. Dr. Otto Hahn, a distinguished physicist and geologist, wrote the following report:

"The forms in this Knyahinya meteor are simple organic ones, such as sponges,

coral, crinoids, etc., small but perfect in external and internal organic structure.

"Only the soft parts are lacking. All the rest is preserved, even as it lived and moved in water. The crinoid stems showed this most plainly, for these are notably curved, wound up, entangled, and though occasionally broken, one sees their weak resistance to their impinging neighbors. The half-round lobe divides itself into layers, these into tubes, which branch, forming arms which a canal unites. Then it develops itself into a crown between the arms, and the point of their growth, and the simplest crinoid is there.."

A chemical verification of the examination of the meteor by Hahn was undertaken by the great German chemist, Cohen, who drew up a report of his finding. Examining other meteors he found the presence of hydro-carbons and oxygen. Those meteorites whose fall is accompanied by luminous effects precipitate upon their surface a brownish black powder which Cohen found contained 71 per cent carbonaceous matter. Some meteors contained 6 to 11 per cent of water.

The most astounding revelation of the spectroscope is the fact that chlorophyll exists on the planets Uranus and Neptune, the two most distant worlds of the solar system. Those who realize that all non-parasitic plants contain chlorophyll, and that it is found in all living vegetable cells, are aware that the demonstration of chlorophyll on these two distant planets shows rather conclusively the existence of living matter. Chlorophyll is a chemical related to the proteins. It is absolutely essential to plants for it enables them to prepare food from raw mineral matter.

Of course, there are many scientists who will not accept these demonstrated facts of the microscope and spectroscope. There are many, on the other hand, of equally great prominence who believe that life has been proved to exist on other planets.



The Dark Swordsmen of Saturn

By NEIL R. JONES

Revenge lured Lindquist to towering Greygin Deg, where a sly killer lurked behind the clicking blades of the Dark Swordsmen.

“YOU are going to die, Denhert, but before you die you are going to tell me where Strower is.”

Lindquist, the lone pirate, watched his

victim with cold, calculating eyes in which there lurked a subtle hint of sadness. Here was one of the men he had tracked so long and relentlessly among the worlds and

moons of the solar system since his own renunciation of civilization. It had been this same Denhert and his partner Strower who had come to Mars in a pirate cruiser to steal Lindquist's young bride for the retinue of Garn Ellend, the pirate emperor of the earth.

"Wait until Ellend gets you!" snarled Denhert.

The blue-liveried pirate leered defiantly at Lindquist despite the bonds which strapped him to the laboratory chair. A tall, massive figure, a Venusian, fully a head taller than Lindquist, loomed in the background waiting his master's bidding. His repulsive, scarred face remained impassive, yet his single good eye glared balefully at Denhert, lifting occasionally to watch Lindquist for instructions. The hands of the Venusian troglodyte tightened perceptibly upon the controls of a complicated apparatus beside Denhert.

"No, Cyclops—not yet!" Lindquist admonished, and turned his attention to the earth pirate. "Ellend will never seek me out. He fears me. He sends men like you, Denhert, whom I trap—if they're worth trapping. You were worth that trouble to me. So is Strower. Where is he?"

"You think I'd tell you?" Denhert blustered. "Not even if you offered me my life, which you haven't!"

"You are right about that," the lone pirate responded quietly. "It will be your life now, then Strower's. Ellend will be last. I shall have to find my way through the blanket of destructive rays again and hunt him out. Not all your damnable space pirates or cunning of the cult can keep me from that. I am the only man who can reach the outlawed world without using your space locks you guard so carefully."

"Ellend will forgive you your grudge, will make you practically a king, in return for that secret," Denhert urged eagerly. "The Durna Rangué will reward you liberally. Anything you demand that can possibly be given you will be yours."

"I desire nothing except revenge!" rasped Lindquist. "Everything that I loved in life is dead!" The perpetually drawn lines of his face became intensified with his sorrow and bitterness. His eyes gleamed excitedly, and his hands commenced instinctively to fondle the butts of his atom pistols slung one on each side.

"She died five years ago at the hands of that filthy space vulture when he was through with her! I fought my way through the hell of the cult to find her dead on a slab ready for one of their devilish experiments! And you helped put her there, Denhert!"

The blue-liveried pirate quailed momentarily before the awful intensity of Lindquist's flaming hatred. The Cyclops meanwhile fastened his one eye on the lithe, dark-garbed figure of Lindquist. Denhert slid a swift, sidelong glance at the menacing troglodyte. Mustering his courage, he again sought to reason with the lone pirate.

"You are mad! Everything could be yours! Perhaps even the position Ellend holds. The cult is none too well satisfied with him. They can depose him any time they wish. They are the true power. We are but minions set up in power as a reward for conquest of the earth under the cult's direction and scientific aid. Be one of us. You have no friends. The hand of civilization is against you. The Interplanetary Guard is always looking for you. Some day, one or the other of us will get you."

"Thanks to the conniving of the cult," spoke Lindquist grimly, his wrath dispelled, "I was made to appear a conspirator in the earth's conquest. I am not even safe here on Venus in this hideaway. But I shall go on, nevertheless, to fulfill my destiny. Where is Strower?"

"I'll see you in hell first!"

"Then you'll have to wait for me, Denhert, for you're going there first," Lindquist countered suggestively, nodding slightly to his one-eyed henchman.

THE earth pirate's nerve became slightly shaken as he watched the burly Cyclops go silently about the task of swinging an octagon block of translucent material above his head and push a square, flat box beneath the chair. The silent troglodyte next snapped together two sets of three-semi-circular rings about the pirate's body equi-distant from him by about eight inches. The face of the octagon block was flat. The other side tapered to a diamond point which led off into several wires. The Cyclops' hairy hand glided along these wires and into a box on a nearby laboratory table from which he lifted a small dome

to which they were attached. Denhert's eyes darted anxiously to Lindquist as this dome was set upon his head and fastened with straps and adjustable, padded plates.

"Torture, eh? Think that will make me tell—but I won't!"

"You can talk now if you want to, Denhert. Later, it will not be necessary. Your brain will illustrate without aid of vocal expression just what I want to know."

Sweat started from the man's forehead, and he fought for control of the arrogance he had earlier shown.

"That damned contraption won't find out anything I don't want to tell you! I won't think!"

"You can't help but think, Denhert," Lindquist told him, a faint smile relaxing the hard lines of his face. "No one can deliberately halt their thought processes while conscious."

"I won't think what you want to know!" flashed the pirate.

"That remains to be seen."

"Your torture won't break me down, either, you damned privateer!"

"I don't torture my captives," returned the lone pirate somberly, his eyes dancing with cold fire. "But I could really enjoy myself watching you die like Ellend sometimes makes men die. I am not on his level, however."

Unmistakable relief relaxed the worried lines of Denhert's face. He took a deeper breath, and self assurance welled in him once more. He had not feared the death Lindquist had so ominously mentioned. Memories of Ellend's victims lingered. He had also heard tales of how the Cyclops had received that ghastly, diagonal slash across his face which bridged an empty eye socket. It was the one-eyed giant he feared more than Lindquist.

"Do you want to tell me where Strower is now?"

"He is at Berkeley with Ellend."

"On the earth, you mean?"

"Yes."

"You lie, Denhert. I have positive information that he is not on the earth."

The pirate's face remained impassive. He neither denied nor supported the accusation.

"All right, Cyclops."

At word from Lindquist, the one-eyed giant solemnly pressed a lever and set sev-

eral controls which made the translucent octagon glow strangely and Denhert to jump in sudden surprise. The pirate settled back easily, however, with a puzzled expression when he found that he had been subjected to no pain. The Cyclops turned momentarily elsewhere, and then the lights in the subterranean laboratory went out, leaving as the only illumination the glowing octagon which exuded a lemon-coated brilliance over all nearer objects standing eerily out of the gloom. The faces of Lindquist and Denhert stared ghostily at each other. The Cyclops remained a part of the surrounding shadows. Strange little fires commenced to play about the rings surrounding the pirate who watched them fascinatedly.

"If one of your straps break or comes unattached, which is unlikely, however, don't touch those rings," Lindquist warned him, "unless you want to die a great deal sooner than I expect you to die which would be an extreme source of annoyance to me."

The lone pirate watched the octagon. In its face he saw shadowy objects materialize into sharp focus under the careful adjustment of the Cyclops. There stood Denhert in cinematic relief standing vengefully and triumphantly above his own dead body. It was not what Lindquist wanted to see, and he immediately banished the thought from the other's mind.

"You would, of course, enjoy nothing better than killing me, Denhert. I could have guessed that easily. But let's leave the realm of fancy and concentrate on more material things like, say, the past. Where is Strower?"

Instantly, the picture leaped into chaos, fogged and rematerialized into a figure of a man dressed in the same livery as Denhert. Lindquist's heart skipped a beat. It was Strower. But Denhert was aware of what he was doing, and the picture immediately vanished to be replaced with a view of the pirate barracks at Tucson, Arizona. It was deliberate concentration, for the picture was unusually sharp and replete in detail, something which Denhert had seen often. There was only an occasional flicker as his mind diverted temptingly, as minds will do, to the object he sought deliberately to avoid. Faint impressions of Strower loomed and faded.

DENHERT commenced to find that the ordeal was less serene than he had figured it would be. He found himself under an acute mental strain which was self-inflicted. There was no rest, no way he could cheat the mechanical inquisitor which waited so patiently yet vigilantly upon his train of thought. Lindquist watched like a hawk for the slightest clue. Denhart could actually feel the mild, searching power of the wired headpiece. There was no pain, only the dread of relaxed vigilance which the mental probing induced. There was a strong temptation to let his thoughts drift to Strower. The constant effort of mind avoidance to Strower's whereabouts was exhausting his nerve energies. The temptation finally became so great that Denhart actually concentrated on Strower himself, yet he always placed him in a setting he had known in the past. He found mental relaxation in this for a time; but then again he commenced to feel the strain rapidly becoming intolerable. It was not unlike the water drip of the old inquisition, yet the drip was from within and was not physical. What a horrible burden the secret had become.

Denhart's face dripped yellow beads of sweat in the yellow light which shone upon his tired features. The set corners of Lindquest's mouth turned a bit sardonically in grim satisfaction. He had occasionally prompted the pirate to other thoughts regarding the pirates who held rule over the earthly dominions. He pried into what Denhart knew concerning the guidance and unseen power of the Durna Rangué from their grim, isolated sanctuaries in all parts of the world. He learned much which he had wanted to know, much which at a future time would be valuable.

Denhart's thoughts became more scattered and less clear, almost desperate in design and occasionally fantastic as he sought to invent rather than draw upon memory. More and more his thoughts reverted perilously to Strower, yet never for long did they dare linger upon the ugly, squat figure with the bulky shoulders and evil face. Lindquist found it in his heart, despite his hatred of Denhart and his unscrupulous ways to admire his loyalty and fortitude. Ellend picked his closer associates well. But Denhart was weakening.

Two hours or more of the constant grilling had passed. Lindquist had spoken little, only to prompt the other's mind into desired channels of information or tempt him back to his self-forbidden thought. Pictures from Denhart's mind came and went on the octagon face. The Cyclops never spoke. The image of Strower lingered longer. Lindquist watched his surroundings sharply. Once he saw a space ship. Of course, if Strower was not on the earth he had left in one of the pirate cruisers.

The first inkling the lone pirate received of Strower's whereabouts was the sudden appearance on the octagon face of a red, ringed crescent. It was Saturn.

"So, he has gone to one of Saturn's moons. Dione or Titan? Either is more likely than any of the other of Saturn's moons."

Denhart was shuddering from the strain. His head lolled back, and his eyes darted crazily, yellow irises from the suffused glow of the octagon weirdly surrounding the dilated pupils. Lindquist leaned forward, his face tensed. He made a motion to the Cyclops.

"We're on the right track at last! Intensify the power! He'll go out, but before he does we'll have what we want to know!"

What the Cyclops did was not visible in the dark, but the increased brilliance of the octagon which shaded to a lighter hue brought his ugly features into dim prominence where he stood like a monstrous gargoyle attending the machine. Denhart stiffened suddenly, and his lips set in a hard line. He stared off into infinity straight through Lindquist who had risen to his feet and crept panther-like before his enemy. The darting fires in the three rings became a steady glow. The eyes of the lone pirate shifted to the octagon. He saw Strower, and around him were many brown figures much like men yet strangely unlike them in many respects. One arm terminated in a bony sword, the other in a claw. They wore queer trappings, and their features were not wholly unattractive. Across their eyes and forehead stretched a black band of color, and their noses were straight and clean cut. A narrow slit of a mouth gave them a rather set expression of cruelty and determination. They were

walking with Strower and more of the blue-liveried pirates.

LINDQUIST knew now what he had suspected before. Denhart had gone with Strower to Dione, Saturn's moon. These were the brown swordsmen, or degmen, as their red brethren and hereditary enemies of Dione called them. The brown swordsmen clanned together in castles, or degs, while the red swordsmen lived in walled cities and were more civilized though none the less skilled with their swordarms. The lone pirate had caught Denhart on his way back to the earth. Strower, then, was on Dione at one of the degs. He was not surprised. The red swordsmen, better organized and more law abiding, had cast their lot with the civilizations of colonized Mars and Venus. The degmen, always lawless and at odds with the red swordsmen, were allies of the space pirates.

Lindquist remained watchful. He wondered which deg Strower was visiting. There was probably a plot afoot to enslave more red swordsmen. The thoughts of the rigid and staring Denhart continued their reflection upon the octagon face. No longer did he possess the will to resist mentally. They had at last beaten down his enforced reserve and tapped the hidden secret. Lindquist saw Strower and the group of degmen approach a castle. Its towers and battlements rose in the distance. With the keen scrutiny of a hawk, Lindquist watched it grow closer. A broken tower loomed higher than the rest. It drew a soft exclamation from the lone space pirate.

"Grygin Deg!"

He had discovered what he wanted to know. For a short time afterward, he continued to watch the reflections of Denhart's mind as the group entered the Dionian castle, but he found little more that was helpful. He signaled the Cyclops to shut off the machine. The intensified yellow glow died out, and the rings became invisible in the darkness which engulfed the laboratory.

Presently, the lights came on again, and rubbing his eyes which he momentarily shaded from the brighter glare to which his eyes had become unaccustomed, Lindquist saw the body of Denhart relaxed

and motionless. He was not dead. Of that, he knew. The earth pirate had succumbed from nervous exhaustion.

"Take him out and lock him up," the lone pirate turned to his one-eyed henchman, and then he walked out of the laboratory.

THAT next day, at Lindquist's orders, the Cyclops brought Denhart into the lone pirate's museum and armory in another subterranean chamber, long and narrow. The walls and display cases were covered or filled with weapons of all ages and peoples. There were stone axes of the ancient earthmen, various types of bows and arrows, relics of the ancient Martians including their effective, sun-ray reflector tubes, and knives, axes, lances and all forms of offensive cutlery were liberally represented. The powder, cap and lead slug guns of six centuries earlier were in evidence as well as the electric pistols which followed in a later era. This type of weapon led up to the various ray guns and counter rays, or nullifiers. The successor of these weapons was the modern atom pistol.

Two of these black, ominous death-dealers hung from the hips of Lindquist. They were a part of him, for he was never without them. It was said that they moved at his bidding, literally leaping into his clutching, lightning-like hands, yet this was a fallacy founded on the wild supposition of an observer who once had occasion to witness the lone pirate's remarkable speed and accuracy in handling them.

Denhart was once again his offensive, sarcastic self as he swaggered in with a spiteful glitter in his eyes for the black-clad, lone pirate. The ever-watchful Cyclops, who saw more with his one eye than many people with two, followed him, a hand conveniently near his atom pistol.

"Well, now you know what you do," sneered Denhart, "you are probably ready to murder me."

"No one said anything about murder. Murder and its kindred crimes I leave solely to Ellend and those devils in human form who call themselves the Asurians."

"Then you mean to let me go?" Denhart asked hopefully.

"You'll be let go, all right," Lindquist grated harshly. A fanatical gleam rested

in the pupil of each eye as he paused before his next words. "As one who aided principally in stealing my young wife for the clutches of that snake, that arch-demon who calls himself the pirate emperor of the earth, I condemn you to death by combat. I promised you that I would kill you, Denhert."

The pirate was puzzled. It was unlike his kind to grasp any suggestion of fair play in a situation where one held all the power. "Wha—what do you mean?" he queried.

"We shall fight to the death with any pair of weapons you may care to choose. Look—you have centuries, even ages, from which to select your choice of weapons. Here are tools of combat of long dead races, some of whom mankind never knew. Weapons of three worlds and four satellites are before you. Choose. I have an appointment to keep with Strower, you know."

Something in the lone pirate's deadly confidence caused an uncomfortable chill to run up and down Denhert's back. It was talked among the space pirates that Lindquist was not right in the head. He believed he recognized a touch of this insanity now in Lindquist's offer to fight him on even terms with any weapon he chose from the well-equipped armory. His eyes darted among the myriad weapons. One thing he knew for certain. Lindquist was cleverly dangerous and the match for any space pirate who ever sped the shoreless seas of the cosmos.

LINDQUIST caught the sudden gleam in Denhert's eye but he misinterpreted it as a sign that the pirate had found weapons to which he felt himself peculiarly suited. With a quick movement, Denhert bowled the lone pirate to the floor. The Cyclops yanked his gun from its holster too late. Denhert was out of range behind a heavy display case on hands and knees as Lindquist's quickly-jerked gun sprayed his previous position with savage, blue flashes. Denhert's hand came up rapidly over the edge of the display case and disappeared holding an ancient sub-machine gun. There came a sputtering of sharp reports, and a barrage of lead slugs shot out the lighting system, plunging the armory into darkness. Several violet shafts

of light streaked ineffectually from the pistol of the Cyclops.

"Back against wall, Cyclops!" the crisp, hard tones of Lindquist cut the dark. "Find your way out! Get Liate, Mre and Oruk and wait outside! Denhert has chosen his method of combat! It suits me well enough!"

A pyrotechnic of blinding flashes and explosions lit up the vicinity of Lindquist's last remark.

"Not even close, Denhert. I suspected as much. You've found the explosion tossers of early twenty-first century vintage, I see. I know just about where you are, now."

Stabbing blue death spread fanwise from the lone pirate's spitting atom pistols. A blue, crackling flame from an electric gun was Denhert's answer. Another intermittent series of blue flashes followed, and the scrambling, panting sounds which followed apprised Lindquist of the other's narrow escape. Something whizzed close above Lindquist's crouching body and smashed against the wall, setting an old muzzle-loading rifle to clanking. Reaching a groping hand, Lindquist felt of the battle ax Denhert had chanced upon and thrown at his last burst of firing. He smiled grimly. Stealing along past more cases, he retaliated to this medieval choice with several acid bombs fired in quick succession from a spring gun. He heard them smash and listened to the sizzling of their deadly, corroding contents. He heard a variety of obscene curses. Denhert had been lightly sprayed.

Again his pistols blazed blue death in the general direction of the voice. Behind him, something struck the wall. It was the clang of cutlery thrown with savage, hopeful intent. Lindquist thought of the static paralyzers nearby, but he did not want to temporarily disable the pirate. He wanted to kill him. For several minutes neither of them made a move, and then suddenly Denhert's agonized voice split the dark.

"Lindquist! I crawled into that damnable acid! My body's on fire!"

"Roll in it!" was the terse reply as the lone pirate quickly abandoned his position. "You'll die sooner!"

"Help me out!" the voice preyed on Lindquist's supposedly mad twist. "This

is no way for me to die! I'll battle you with atom pistols!"

"All right," was Lindquist's laconic and emotionless reply. "Cyclops, send in a radium light."

A subtle movement from Denhart's position did not escape Lindquist's sharp ears. He was prepared as the Cyclops brought in the light himself. A flickering movement far up to one end of the arms museum caught the tail of his eye. It was not where Denhart had called to him. With lightning rapidity, the lone pirate swisted his body into a knot close to the floor beneath a withering blast of destructive light, both atom pistols spitting silent, blue death at the visible Denhart in the midst of his last, treacherous act. Semi-gloom engulfed that end of the armory as the Cyclops instinctively ducked to the floor behind a display case of nineteenth century weapons.

"Raise the light above your head," Lindquist instructed him coolly.

The lone pirate peered over his pistols around the end of a case. Denhart lay slumped over the lens of a heat lamp which had burnt him to a crisp before more of Lindquist's shots had put the lamp out of commission. The lone pirate urged his one-eyed henchman closer. Together, they examined Denhart. His head and shoulders crumbled to ashes at their touch, and one of his arms fell to the floor. Denhart had fallen across the lamp dead. On lower parts of the pirate's body, they found black, charred discs which marked the fire of Lindquist's atom pistols. These discs marked the outlines of charred cylinders of flesh all the way through the pirate's dead body.

"I'll never give Strower the chance for treachery that Denhart had," vowed Lindquist. "That generosity coupled with my old habit of collecting weapons nearly finished me off."

IT was not long after this that from an island in the vast morass of the great Stoencan swampland of Venus a space ship arose and became lost in the gray and silver cloud blankets, bound for the rarified heights and into space.

The trip was a long one to the seventh planet, and several earthly days were consumed in plumbing the dark, cosmic depths

at ultra-meteoric speed before Saturn stood out against the fiery star dust of infinity, a red blot encircled by its graceful rings. Several smaller blots of light in various phases were also visible on their journeys around Saturn, and toward Dione, the fourth satellite, Lindquist headed the ship.

A touch on his arm turned his attention to the Cyclops. The giant troglodyte motioned significantly to the proximity detector plates. The lone pirate consulted the moving dots.

"Ships of the Interplanetary Guard. Here we've come all the way from Venus and passed Mars in opposition without meeting a soul. Not much surprised though, Cyclops. There's deviltry afoot among the space pirates and degmen."

The cruisers of the Interplanetary guard were the swiftest in the cosmos, and Lindquist had often wished that he had one of them. They were well to keep away from, and it was always a larger group of pirate ships which possessed the temerity to do battle. Lindquist was thankful for his ingenuity in having more powerful proximity detectors than either enemy pirates or ships of the guardsmen. This more than anything else was responsible for his present liberty and well-being.

Passing the danger zone of distant ships, they neared Dione which loomed vast and multi-colored. There was a strip of nearly total darkness feebly visible by reason of reflected light from other moons; the rest of the visible sphere was tinged a subtle shade of red from Saturn's illumination; circling the satellite, they moved above the daylight area of weak sunlight, part of that surface merging with the red light from Saturn. They passed high out of sight above Laroos, a city of the red swordsmen. It did not take Lindquist long to locate Grygin Deg, several hundred miles beyond.

The large, black castle loomed large under the powerful lens through which Lindquist examined it. Degmen were visible moving about the massive gates and walls. The deg, like all others of its kind, was a veritable feudal fortress, for the degmen often fought among themselves. Of late, the space pirates had been trying to organize them. The cult was back of it all. Lindquist saw no space ships, but he real-

ized how easy it would be to conceal or camouflage them.

"We'll drop anchor a few miles away and hide the ship," he told the Cyclops. "I want to watch that place for Strower."

They searched for and found an ideal position, a hollow among several hills where the tall, yellow grass and trees would help screen the ship. A hill nearby commanded a good telescopic view of the deg with the ruined tower. Descending many miles away, they clung low to the ground in speeding rapidly to their chosen position. Leaving the ship well hidden, Lindquist and his servitor crept to the brow of the hill.

The lone pirate soon became absorbed in watching the castle several miles away, and the time passed quickly for him. He watched the brown figures on the walls and outside the deg. Many of them gathered, and their formation outside the deg spoke of a march. The troglodyte sat silently beside him as he watched with the lens strapped to his head.

A wild yell suddenly aroused them from behind. Lindquist jumped and turned excitedly, his hands leaping for his guns. Through the powerful lens of the glasses, he saw but a mixture of dull red moving against yellow. He heard the trampling of feet, excited yells, panting lungs and the snarling growl of the Cyclops. He also heard an ominous clicking as he tore frantically at the glasses with one hand, his other gripping an atom pistol.

MANY things occurred simultaneously. A warm, muscular body struck him forcibly; the lens and straps came away from his head; he felt his remaining gun yanked from its holster; while a struggling figure engaged him on the grass. He looked into a crimson face. Dark eyes stared keenly from a black band of color across the other's face. Instinctively, the lone pirate's free hand leaped to grip the struggling blade of the red swordsman who had borne him to the ground. The swordsman meanwhile held his gun arm to disadvantage. Lindquist hurled the red swordsman from him with doubled knees. He leaped to his feet to find more than a score of red swordsmen rushing them. The one-eyed troglodyte held two of them on their backs while three more struggled

to overcome him, another of them darting around the melee on nimble feet waiting for an opportunity to sink his poised blade.

Like a tidal wave, they bore down on Lindquist. One of them already stood before him as he rose from the trampled, yellow grass, and he was quickly deprived of his remaining weapon as he paused a split-second to contemplate the Cyclops' helplessness. A lightning flick of the swordsman's supple swordarm sent his atom pistol spinning out of sight. And then they were down on him like an avalanche, pinning him to the ground. A bony blade was quickly pressed against his throat, its tip jabbed menacingly beneath his chin.

"Hold, or you die, pirate! We know you, Lindquist!"

"I have no quarrel with the red swordsmen," Lindquist replied in the language of the swordsmen as he was dragged forcibly to his feet.

"But the reward offered by the Interplanetary Guard is large," was the reply. "Yald and all the red swordsmen are honest, and we do no bargaining with degs-men or pirates."

The comparison of contempt was not lost upon Lindquist. The menacing blade still threatened his life. His eyes fell upon the struggling heap which was his faithful Cyclops and combatants. The lone pirate recognized the fact that the red swordsmen had passed up the opportunity of killing him, still struggling to subdue the animal strength of the huge troglodyte.

"It's no use, Cyclops," Lindquist called. "They've got us all right. They want us alive."

He hoped they had no knowledge of his space ship, but his hopes were shortlived when he saw several flying figures circling far above the location of the hidden craft. They were red swordsmen on skels, great birds from the Dionian forests which the red swordsmen had trained and saddled for air travel.

Lindquist and the Cyclops were held securely on each side by swordsmen. Sword tips swung and clicked suggestively about them. They were forced in the direction of a small village of the red swordsmen which Yald curtly informed Lindquist was a scant ten miles distant.

"If you go quietly, all is well," said Yald, "but if you resort to trickery, we

shall not hesitate to run you through."

"Am I as valuable dead as alive?"

"You are."

"Then why did you not kill us in combat?"

"It heightens the glory of the red swordsmen to say that they caught the great Lindquist and his terrible, one-eyed lieutenant alive."

"Prestige, I see."

"And the red swordsmen respect brave men, too," added Yald generously.

LINDQUIST bowed his acknowledgment of the compliment. His eyes sparkled, and he was about to speak when a voluble chatter among several of the swordsmen made him pause and look upward in the direction they gesticulated and waved their swordarms aloft. A plunging, black space ship raced earthward on a long slant. It sped in the direction of the few swordsmen on circling skels who were now urging their aerial mounts to the ground. Riders and mounts were killed instantly and sent plunging downward. A slower-settling cloud of feathers followed leisurely. The remaining skels were swiftly guided down to safety.

"Another pirate!" one of the swordsmen spat and glared ominously at the two prisoners. "Lindquist's friends!"

"Lindquist has no friends," replied Yald quietly. "It is a ship of the earth pirates."

Other swordsmen grunted or nodded their agreement. Meanwhile, the space ship circled afar, nearly a speck on the distant horizon, returning swiftly and unerringly above the position the swordsmen had been circling on skels. Several flaring rays leaped one after another downward. A terrific roar shook the ground and wreckage leaped skyward in the swift wake of the passing space ship. A fierce crackling followed like an echo. Lindquist watched the remnants of his space ship settle back to the ground.

"Quick—out of sight!" Yald urged them. "They will blast us next!"

Expertly, the red swordsmen searched shelter under trees, in the grass, behind rocks, some of them becoming inert parts of the hillside. Many times the space ship circled the vicinity, yet it did not drop down or even come low. A few times

they hopefully believed that the ship had departed for good when it flew out of sight, but always an eagle-eyed swordsman saw it returning, usually from the direction of the nearby deg the lone pirate had been watching. He and the Cyclops were still under surveillance, but there was little need of it. A common foe rode on high.

Yald's attention focused upon the sharp, low-hissed exclamation of a swordsman who came sneaking on his hands and knees through the bushes.

"Degmen are coming over the hill! A large force of them! They are come to hunt us out! The ship rides above to direct them!"

"That is why the ship did not rake about with its fire," reasoned Yald thoughtfully. "The degmen and pirates are working together. The pirates want slaves to take back to the earth. We have a fighting chance. Wait until the degmen are among us; then rise and fight."

"Let us fight with you," urged Lindquist. "They are my enemies, too, even had they not destroyed my ship."

"We are honored," Yald flourished his blade in a magnificent gesture.

The degmen came closer. Their legs could be heard swishing the grass aside, their bony blades rattling the bushes. A tall, brown figure suddenly found himself face to face with a red swordsman who had leaped up before him so suddenly that his surprised defense had time to make but one startled parry before the red swordsman darted his blade to a vital spot. This was the signal the red swordsmen had been awaiting. Their battle cry rose clear and strong as they precipitated themselves among the half-surprised degmen who had been hunting them yet had found them sooner than they had expected.

"Uh-ra-ha! Uh-ra-ha!"

All became instant pandemonium and clashing blades. Lindquist sprang up with Yald at his side. The latter engaged a degman who aimed a vicious blow at him. With lightning movements of superlative swordsmanship, Yald penetrated the other's guard, lunging his blade deep into the degman's vitals. His rapier was scarcely stained with the brown swordsman's life-blood when it was withdrawn swiftly to clash with another degman. The odds

threatened to be overwhelming. There were dying shrieks above the cursing, clashing din of battle. Yald called to his swordsmen to converge and work toward the top of the hill.

Lindquist planted an iron fist into the face of a degman. Another he caught by the swordarm, snapping the blade off and hurling the screeching degman into several more who were advancing to attack. A blade swung his way in a hissing arc. It was too late to dodge, and he raised his arm and ducked. The blade never struck him, for a sinewy red arm shot forward and upward in a quick lunge which parried the blow. The lone pirate's quick smile thanked an unknown swordsman.

THE milling red swordsmen closed in a group, backs to backs, partly surrounded by their brown foe. It was a vicious, desperate defense on the part of the red swordsmen. Above them all rose the head of the Cyclops who, armed with the body of a brown swordsman whose neck he had broken, flailed it brutally like a club at all the degmen who came within his reach. Lindquist's fingers itched for the touch of his customary weapons, and he voiced his regret that Yald had not kept them.

"Who thought such as this would come to pass!" rued Yald, indicating the carnage and trampled, dead bodies around them. "Besides, what of the enemy above? Would they tolerate your slaughter of the degmen?"

The lone pirate realized the wisdom of this, yet from time to time through force of habit his hands darted to the empty holsters.

They were gaining the hilltop. On all sides the degmen pressed their attack. Dead and wounded lay strewn behind the scene of battle. The pirate space ship lurked on high. Several red swordsmen had already been taken prisoners. Others lay dead. Seeing the superior forces of degmen, Lindquist realized that it would only be a question of time. The degmen seemed to have forgotten the value of slaves. They fought with the killing fury of old, and the red swordsmen retaliated in kind. Swordarms leaped faster than the eye could follow, slashing, darting and biting. There were no more individual

duels. It was group dueling, a wall of dancing blades, the degmen seeking to break and scatter their compact foe on the hilltop and employ the natural advantage of their numbers. Quarter was neither given nor asked. Brown and red alike overwhelmed a lone swordsman wherever they could. The red swordsmen possessed an intelligent advantage, and it was by dint of their terrific fencing and deadly skill that the brown legions from the degs did not quickly overcome them.

But the end was already a foregone conclusion of what the red swordsmen themselves must have known. They were divided and broken into lone, fighting groups. An amplified order from the space ship warned the degmen against the slaughter their fighting frenzy had worked them to, reminding them of the red slaves they had set out to capture.

Red swordsmen were engaged by degmen while others leaped upon them from behind and bore them down. It was soon over. Lindquist, as soon as he saw Yald taken, gave up the struggle he was waging against two brown swordsmen. The Cyclops was hardest to overcome, and seeing that the huge Venusian was in no danger of being run through, the lone pirate did not discourage his resistance. With glittering eyes, Lindquist watched six degmen finally overcome his brute strength at the cost of snapped swords and broken, twisted bones.

THEY were all lined up on the brow of the hill. The space ship descended and came to rest at the foot of the hill. Meanwhile, another band of degmen hurried into view, swelling the ranks of those who had fought victoriously. Several figures stepped out of the space ship and started up the hill. Lindquist's blood turned to ice as he recognized the peculiar, blue livery of Garn Ellend's men. His eyes narrowed to glowing coals, and his face set in strained, hard lines as he reached instinctively for the deadly weapons which were gone.

One of the approaching pirates, squat, thick-set and brutal of expression, was Strower, the man he had come to Dione to kill, and all his killer's instinct tingled at a high pitch. A degman and two space pirates walked with him. Strower saw

Lindquist and the Cyclops. His astonishment yielded to unholy delight.

"Brong, you will live in luxury for this good fortune!" thundered Strower, slapping the startled degman's back. "Your brown devils have captured Lindquist, the lone space pirate, who's the greatest thorn in Garn Ellend's side in the whole solar system—and I'm not countin' out the guardsmen, either! He'll pay a fortune for this man!"

Strower strode up and leered triumphantly at Lindquist. "Denhart told me you were lookin' fer us. Wait'll I show him the prize I caught!"

"You'll wait the rest of your life, then, Strower. I killed Denhart."

All the deadly hate of the lone pirate for Lindquist lurked in those few, quiet words.

"What's that?" demanded Strower in mixed unbelief and astonishment. "What you givin' us?"

"I killed Denhart," Lindquist replied, and Strower read the truth in the firm lines of his face. "I caught him on the way back to earth from Dione. I made him tell where you were. That's why I am here—to kill you."

"Why, you dirty ———"

Strower slapped a hairy paw across Lindquist's face with a resounding crack. The lone pirate never flinched, but the color drained from his face, and his eyes grew colder with deadly intent. Only the degmen who held him were aware of his physical reaction to the blow.

"If it weren't for Ellend, I'd roast and skewer you alive, but it's likely he'll think of somethin' as good—maybe better—and you can bet I'll be there!"

At this point, Strower's fury subsided to more controlled expression, and he seemed to be partly satisfied with the anticipation of Lindquist's eventual fate. He turned to the chief of Grygin Deg who stood alongside.

"Brong! Have all the prisoners taken back to the deg well guarded. We'll go back in the ship and watch out for any more bands of those red devils who may be in the neighborhood."

THE red swordsmen, with Lindquist and the Cyclops, were marched to Grygin Deg over a well-worn trail they

struck into soon after leaving the hills. The massive portals swung open, and they were ushered into a broad courtyard. The black stones of the castle reared their combined bulk forbiddingly, and into this dark pile the prisoners were directed with jabs from the sword tips of their brown captors. Stone-flagged corridors were left behind, and they descended gloomy, stone stairways into levels below the castle. In the third level, Lindquist suddenly found himself with the Cyclops, Yald and another red swordsman. Many degmen surrounded them, but the rest of the captives had disappeared, probably led off in different directions on the higher levels. The lone pirate and his three companions were led down a poorly lit side passage which was too narrow for more than one to pass at a time. The degmen kept them separated until they reached a metal grating which swung inward to a broad cell. They were each administered a spiteful jab and told to get inside. The grating was then slammed shut and locked, and the small band of degmen left, the patter of their sandals on the stone floor and the brushing clatter of their blades becoming less noisy and finally dying away.

"Well, they took us," observed Yald regretfully.

"But you put up a great fight," commended Lindquist. "For the Cyclops and I, this means an exquisite and elaborate death at the hands of Garn Ellend."

"I am of relatively less importance, I fear," Yald admitted, "although I am a small chief among my people. For Ruod and I, it means slavery on the earth or victims for the Durna Rangue to experiment on."

"Is this slavery on the earth so tolerable that you would not risk death on the long chance of escape if such a chance were offered?" queried Lindquist.

"Show me the chance!" the red swordsman demanded. "Death by fighting for freedom is preferred to slavery!"

"I do not know that there will be a chance—yet," the lone pirate admitted, "but if there is one, I want to know how you and Ruod will stand."

"We'll take it, no matter how lopsided, if you suggest it, Lindquist."

"We shall wait and see what our chances are when they come to take us

out," said Lindquist. "Watch me for a signal. If one of the pirates comes with the degmen, I may be able to get an atom pistol."

The dungeon was furnished with a bench and several musty pallets on which to lie. It was dark and gloomy, the faint illumination from a radium lamp in the opposite wall of the corridor making of them but fitful moving shadows. They were three levels beneath the ground. There was at least one more level below their own, for they had seen another stairway descending into the dark.

Periods of sleeping alternated with exchanges of morose conversation. At intervals, food and drink were thrust inside and left on the floor by a single degman who came but never opened the door. Lindquist estimated that two days must have passed. He wondered what plans Strower had made. He had expected the pirate to lose little time in taking him to Ellend. At any time, he expected to be removed from the dungeon along with the Cyclops and placed aboard a space ship bound for the outlawed world. It was during the third day that Lindquist, hearing the degman coming with their food, stole to one side of the grated doorway and watched from the shadows. Something he saw sent him immediately back to Yald after the degman moved away.

THE next time the degman brought their food, he was startled from his moody thoughts when a pair of huge hands reached through and laid hold of his neck and shoulder in a strong grip. A foot stamped and held his swordarm in the act of shoving the food inward. His surprise was short-lived, for a long blade darted through the grating and into his vitals, followed by another sword thrust from a different angle. The rough, gray hands which gripped the dying degman were those of a troglodyte. Slender, brown hands groped through the grating, and, unmindful of the splash of blood upon them from a withdrawn swordarm, sought and found the bunch of keys the lone pirate had noticed the time before.

The troglodyte's grip relaxed, allowing the dead body to slump forward. Meanwhile, the hands of Lindquist were busy finding the right key from continual trial

and error until the right one fitted and turned. The grating was then jerked open, and four prisoners walked cautiously into the narrow corridor over the brown swordsman. Yald stooped and wiped off his bloody blade on the degman's hair and then picked up the corpse and threw it in the dungeon, pulling the grating shut once more. They filed out into the broader passage.

"If we can only get to the upper levels unseen, we may be able to drop out of a window to the top of the wall, offered Lindquist.

"A long drop," muttered Ruod.

They made their way cautiously up the stairways to the ground level and met no one. It was on the ground level that they almost ran on tiptoe into a group of degmen rounding a turn. In the semi-gloom, the surprised degman did not at once recognize their foe until Yald and Ruod had each run their blades into a brown figure. Lindquist and the Cyclops closed with two more who fought desperately to use their bony rapiers. The Cyclops had a fondness for breaking necks and added another victim to his diversion. Lindquist bent his opponent's swordarm until he shrieked in maddened pain. The remaining degmen at once engaged the two red swordsmen and set up a furor to attract attention. The answering yells of degmen came from every direction.

"Come on! We can't stay here and fight!" exclaimed Lindquist, hurling the yelling degman into the faces of those who battled Yald and Ruod. "They'll all be down on us! Find the quickest way out!"

They ran in the direction of the courtyard. Two brown swordsmen approached them on the run. The degmen had just issued from the daylight; the four fugitives were still in the semi-gloom of the corridor.

"In here a moment!" hissed Yald, taking hold of Lindquist's arm.

Ruod and the Cyclops darted into the doorway with them. Yald stood ready as the two degmen stepped past. With a rapid stroke of his supple swordarm, the red swordsman sent the head of the nearer degman rolling down the corridor much to the dumb astonishment and stupefied horror of his companion, who next felt a foot or more of bony blade transfix him. So

quickly did it all happen that both bodies fell together, the headless one across the other.

Yald urged them from their concealment, and they dashed into the courtyard. A concerted cry arose from degmen inside the walls. The lone pirate drew the attention of his companion to a small roof which flanked the high wall above the courtyard at one end of the castle.

"If we can make that roof, we may be able to hold them off and edge along the roof where we can climb down outside!"

Ruod stared hopelessly at the top of the wall so far above their heads. "But how to get up?" he protested.

Lindquist made no reply but gave a running leap and caught the edge of the wall with his fingers, hanging a moment before he flexed his muscles to yank himself across the wall. He turned.

"Hoist them up, Cyclops!"

THE big troglodyte ogled fearfully at the degmen running across the courtyard and boosted Yald up the wall where the lone pirate gripped his swordarm and helped him up. The Cyclops lifted Ruod to where the red swordsman might catch hold with his one hand and left him hanging there as the degmen rushed him. The Cyclops grunted his pain and anger as his fending arm met the biting tip of a swordarm. Lindquist and Yald dragged Ruod up as a degman rushed forward and aimed a vicious cut at his hanging body. Too late, the rapier slashed a long scratch in the wall. A degman was now behind the one-eyed giant who was beset from both sides. Yald snapped a command to Ruod, who seized his legs as he lay down across the wall.

The Cyclops was aware of his peril from behind, but he was assailed from the front by two degmen and could give no attention to the one in the rear. The latter strode up behind the Venusian and measured his broad back for the death thrust as he drew back his swordarm. It was Yald, leaning far out and held by his legs in the grip of Lindquist and Ruod, who parried the blow and dealt the degman a vicious cut across his forehead. Streaming blood, the degman fell, and the retreating Cyclops stumbled backward over his body and would have fallen but for the wall behind

him. Quick as thought, he seized the dazed swordsman and used him to batter at the darting swordarms which sought to reach him. More degmen had reinforced the original three. Others were pouring from the deg.

"Jump!" cried Lindquist, his hands darting excitedly to the empty holsters once more. "Hurry, Cyclops, or they'll have you downed!"

Hurling the mutilated degman into the faces and swordarms of his fellows, the Cyclops turned and leaped up the wall. All three on the wall were quick to pull him up, but not too soon. A brown blade struck his leg and drank deeply.

"To the roof!" cried Yald, and they sped to the small roof which backed against a towering wall of the castle.

Degmen pushed one another upon the wall and followed. Ruod turned to fight. The wall was not broad enough for two abreast. He engaged with the foremost degman. Their blades flashed too quick for the eye to follow, leaping in and out, darting and clashing. With a swift series of feints and counter strokes, Ruod sent his swordarm into the heart of the degman, who fell gasping out his life in the arms of a companion behind him. The dying warrior was tossed unceremoniously off the wall. Ruod backed toward the roof which his fellow fugitives had gained. His bare shoulder struck the foot of Yald who stood on the roof's edge above him.

The foremost degman was upon Ruod. Again he battled. Above him, Yald leaned out and severed the degman's throat with a fierce swing. Ruod seized the opportunity and turning, leaped upon the roof beside Yald. Together, with ready blades, they prepared to hold off the degmen. Another brown swordsman took up the challenge. Ruod retired, waiting, at a terse word from Yald, who crouched on the roof's edge and engaged the degman. The latter held off, cunningly enticing Yald to descend, but the red swordsman stayed where he was. The fugitives held the advantage, and only one degman at a time could approach the roof.

Yald continued to counter the cautious efforts of the degman when from the castle there issued into the milling ranks of the brown swordsmen more reinforcements. One of them bawled orders and abusive execrations. Lindquist recognized Brong,

the chief of Grygin Deg. He wondered where the space pirates were. These were all swordsmen who surrounded Brong.

"Ladders, you fools!" screeched Brong, waving his swordarm menacingly. "Scale the roof and take them! Those red devils can slaughter you coming from the wall as you do!"

While the line of degmen on the wall waited, the one closest to the roof still engaging Yald in desultory swordplay, degmen hurried about the courtyard and into the castle, Brong shouting orders and cursing his followers for being present in such large ineffective numbers as to block each other's way. Ladders rattled against the wall, and clambering degmen raced up them. Those on the wall pressed their attack against Yald, two of them standing close and clinging together, both darting their blades at the red swordsman above them.

THE CYCLOPS, his white scar flushed with the heat of battle, seized the ladder nearest him and hurled it into the middle of the thronging degmen. A swordsman on the lower rungs fell back. Lindquist's fist smashed into the face of a mounting degman whose sword tip he fended, sending him toppling off the ladder. Ruod ran the length of the roof, quickly pushing over three ladders, one of which came back again immediately. Up the ladder rushed several degmen. One of them leaped safely to the roof just as Ruod returned. He engaged the red swordsman who knocked the ladder sideways with his foot where it fell to the ground, hearing with it several degmen. More light ladders were being erected. They were a requisite to the degmen in their raids on the cities.

A hoarse yell from several brown throats swelled into a roar as a dark space ship raced into view above the deg. It was Strower's ship. It hovered over the scene of battle speculatively. Ruod battled the degman desperately in an effort to dispose of him and be back on the roof's edge defending it from further attack, but the latter proved a skilled swordsman and appeared to be cautiously stalling for time until more of his comrades had gained the roof. The space ship settled out of sight. The ladders were being erected too fast

for Lindquist and the Cyclops to handle. There were too many of them, too many degmen. The towering Venusian, glaring balefully at the foe from his single eye, seized a ladder and used it to batter away others and mounting degmen until it was reduced to kindling which he threw disgustedly into the faces of the howling degmen below. The lone pirate felt the sting of a blade in his thigh when he leaped back too late. The Cyclops had been touched in several spots, but his wounds were superficial and served only to make of him a gory spectacle as he revelled in the heat of conflict.

Yald, in desperation, deserted his protection of the wall momentarily to transfix a burly degman who clambered to the roof off a nearby ladder. The red swordsman sent the ladder and several yelling degmen into the closely jammed courtyard. It was the opportunity those upon the wall had been awaiting. Three degmen were on the roof as Yald returned quickly from his brief diversion. The red swordsman faced them, bringing into play every bit of his superior skill. He fought fiercely, desperately, but saw himself forced backward, while behind the three degman others climbed upon the roof.

The Cyclops was already at grips with several, hurling two off the roof before the others bore him down. Had the degmen not been under strict orders to take him and Lindquist alive, the Cyclops would have bled his life out on the roof's edge. Superior numbers overwhelmed him. Another degman had joined the one Ruod battled, and the red swordsman, forced back against the castle wall, battled for his life. Yald, holding off three degmen who pushed him backward inch by inch, was laid open to a murderous thrust from behind, and a sword tip appeared almost magically from his chest. As his swordarm shot upward in a thrust which slit the face of a degman from chin to ear, two swordarms from in front transfixed him and were withdrawn.

Too late did Lindquist kick over another ladder near his corner of the roof and seize the degman behind the tottering Yald. With the body of the thrashing degman above his head, he paused at the roof's edge before hurling it down upon several who were placing a ladder. Into the court

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on the men you've met in the preceding pages—those cosmic-minded writers and illustrators who help to nourish Planet Stories.

HAIL —

"SOME are born great some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." . . . But Frederick Arnold Kummer, Jr., half-nelsoned to fame, partially because he was bored, and partially because this "free, white and twenty-seven" Baltimorean had a vigorous Southern dislike for alarm clocks.

"Four years in the offices of an insurance company at fifteen per will drive the best of men to desperate things. Then, too, the greatest joy of my life is sleeping in the mornings, thumbing my nose at the clock as eight and nine roll by. Who but writers and night-watchmen can do as much?"

"To be sure, I work at least eight hours a day; but they're eight hours of my own choosing, which means a lot. And if I feel like taking a day off, now and then, there's no boss to pass on the authenticity of my grandmothers' demise, or the alleged errand of mercy which requires my presence. The joys of being an author!"

"As to personal likes and fancies. Books, chess, horse-racing, table-tennis, good company . . . but why go on? Let it suffice to say that I have absolutely no desire to write the Great American Novel; that I will write anything for anybody, as long as I get paid for it; that I am the crassest of crass materialists. Geniuses can let their hair grow and bemoan the fate of American letters; my only desire is to become a skilled craftsman and turn out the sort of material that is currently in demand.

"In conclusion, let me caution you against taking this, or any other biography of mine, seriously. They vary, according to the mood I'm in. I once wrote one when I had a hangover and it made Schopenhauer seem like Pollyanna. However, today is a very fine example of spring at its best, so I'm in most excellent spirits. Hence the above.

"Here's hoping you'll like 'Star Pirate.'"

—BUT NOT FAREWELL

HARRY WALTON, author of "Asteroid H277—Plus," is the living refutation of the old adage concerning rolling stones. By the time he was five years old, he had, with the help of a nomadic family, beaten a path between the Continent, England and New York. He couldn't have stayed in the last place long because six years later finds this globe-trotting minor in Berlin, Vienna and Dresden—reading Buffalo Bill and Nick Carter in German. He acquired his education on the run, and it seems to have been a rather hectic acquisition. Concerning the last laps, Mr. Walton says:

from outside the wall rushed several blue-clad figures, among them Strower. Weapons glittered. He saw the evil eyes of the pirate upon him. The degman's seething blade whistled past his ear, and he cast the brown swordsman upon the heads of those mounting the ladder.

More degmen poured upon the roof, and Lindquist saw Brong among them. There was no questioning the chieftain's courage. He rushed Lindquist with his swordarm raised threateningly. The lone pirate sprang and seized his legs, bringing him down grunting and cursing. They rolled together in combat dangerously near the roof's edge. Lindquist rolled over on top. No one was left to guard the roof, and the degmen poured upon it in full force. Someone came to Brong's aid and seized the lone pirate from behind. A pantomimic query seemed to have been raised behind Lindquist, for Brong looked past the lone pirate and shouted negation.

"No!" he roared angrily. "Kill him and you die for it! Ellend pays a fortune for him alive!"

A TERRIFIC roar shook the roof. Even the massive castle trembled to it. There followed a long, crackling hiss. Alarm and cries of agony rolled up from the courtyard below. Falling masonry mingled with the din of throats. The grip on Lindquist's shoulders relaxed. Brong, still staring past Lindquist, suddenly wore an expression of alarm. Something dark flashed through the sky. The lone pirate saw it from the tail of his eye and turned his head. A long, slim cruiser of the Interplanetary Guard streaked over the deg. Another hovered on high. Still a third crept closer from the horizon and grew swiftly in perspective. A blinding, crackling light flashed a split second from the ship overhead, and a tower of the castle staggered, its shattered pinnace crumbling majestically and raining down upon turrets and walls, sending its debris crashing and roaring into a corner of the courtyard. A second flash and roar demolished the gates and a section of the wall.

Lindquist felt the roof leap beneath him and then down it sagged, rolling its combatants helter-skelter into the wreckage and destruction of life in the courtyard. Some-

thing struck Lindquist and dazed him. It was a hard fall. He pushed a brown body off him. Another degman, his swordtip pushed through the dead body of a fellow swordsman and broken off against the flinty floor of the yard, muttered his pain and strove ineffectually to disentangle the remains of his shattered swordarm from the corpse. A pair of brown legs and an arm projected from under the fallen roof close to Lindquist.

He sat up dazedly and looked upon death and further ruin about him. He saw degmen limping into the castle from the sight of the dread destroyers from on high. His full faculties leaped back to him as he saw a blue-clad figure sneak along the wall and disappear into a doorway of the deg. It was Strower. He was escaping further death from the skies. Two of the ships had settled out of sight, but the third one still circled above the deg. Lindquist became aware of a hand which touched his shoulder from behind. He turned and looked into the worried, blood-stained features of his faithful Cyclops. The lone pirate stood up, and the horrible face grinned at him in evident delight at his undamaged condition. Blopd was caking on the troglodyte from several minor word thrusts, but he was still alive and vigorous.

"Strower!" exclaimed Lindquist, pointing to the doorway through which the pirate had vanished. "He went in there! We'll get him if it is the last thing we do!"

The Cyclops followed Lindquist, turning a thoughtful eye upon the space ship above. The lone pirate gripped the troglodyte's arm as he stopped before a crumpled body in the blue livery of Ellend's pirates.

"Wait!"

Quickly he knelt and fumbled in under the body of the pirate with the crushed skull. Lindquist breathed a long sigh of satisfaction as he brought forth an atom pistol and slid it into a waiting holster. Meanwhile, with a grunt of approbation, the Cyclops jerked on a pair of blue legs which disappeared beneath a pile of fallen masonry and brought out another dead pirate, quickly removing the side arm for his own use. Lindquist found another weapon; and after quickly testing them both in the doorway of the deg, he and the Cyclops set forth along the corridor Strower had taken. Lindquist stopped

"Commuted between so many schools in New York and California that they finally lost my record and graduated me. Educational experiments continued at U.C.L.A. and San Diego State, where I specialized in fencing, journalism and short story writing. Won sixth place in a one-act play contest, but have always suspected there were just six entries."

His fiction career was inspired by telling his young brother wild tales about the Katzenjammer Kids, which he considered slightly better than those published. From this fictional cocoon burst a hutterfly in the shape of a harrowing story about a transatlantic tunnel. It fluttered pretty feebly for a time, then died unwept and unsung.

But all that was long ago. Now Mr. Walton devotes his full time to story-writing and his artistic wife. When he feels the need of a spiritual pick-me-up, and just to keep his hand in, he drives back and forth to California. We suspect it's just force of habit; but so long as he can send us stories like "Asteroid H277—Plus," we don't care.

IN THIS CORNER—

IN accordance with its policy, *Planet* presents two new artists: Don Lynch (The Forbidden Dream), and Ed Smalley (The Dark Swordsmen of Saturn). Lynch arrived in these pages via the famous Art Students' League and the post-graduate art school known as Greenwich Village. Despite his occasional jaunts into the field of whimsy, he's a serious artist, whose work was recently on display in a well-known 57th Street gallery. Smalley started off as a designer of airplanes, then changed over to commercial work and advertisements. Perhaps this last phase accounts for the extraordinarily forceful style that characterizes his present work. In the next issue of PS, Smalley will have a chance to draw space-ships. It should be interesting to see what an artist with practical airplane design knowledge can do on ships of the future.

FAN MAG

For the benefit of you PS readers who might be interested in obtaining copies of some of the current science fiction fan publications, we append the following list:

GOLDEN ATOM. Published monthly by Kodak City Publications, Rochester, N. Y. Larry B. Farsaci, Editor. 10¢ per copy.

STARDUST. Science fiction-fact magazine, published bi-monthly by W. Lawrence Hamling, 2609 Argyle St., Chicago, Illinois. 20¢ per copy.

VOICE OF THE IMAGI-NATION. Published quarterly by Ackerman and Morajo, at Box 6475 Metropolitan Station, Los Angeles. 10¢ per copy.

THE 1939 YEARBOOK OF SCIENCE, WEIRD AND FANTASY FICTION. Published annually by Vulcan Publications, Box 260, Bloomington, Ill. Bob Tucker, Editor.

THE COMET—Edited by Tom Wright, R.F.D. #1, Box 129, Martinez, California.

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when he came to the stairways. One set led upward, the other downward. He turned significantly to the Cyclops, whose animal instincts he now consulted. The troglodyte sniffed questioningly both up the stairs and down. He snarled and jerked a horny thumb downward. Together, they descended.

THE Cyclops' sense of smell led them through another corridor and down more stairways. They found themselves on the fourth and last level. The Cyclops stopped suddenly near the turn in one of the damp, ill-lit corridors. He sniffed suspiciously, walked on a few paces and then returned, bending low to the floor. He pointed at something. On hands and knees, Lindquist stooped and found a faint line in the floor. It turned at right angles to form a square. His searching eyes caught sight of a knob of rock on the wall. He motioned the Cyclops back and pressed the knob. A square, dark cavity yawned in the floor. Silently, the lone pirate pointed into it and looked at the Cyclops. The troglodyte moved down the stone steps, Lindquist behind him. They were in a corridor, or tunnel, low and unfinished. The passage ended blankly in under the stone trap which Lindquist left open against the possibility of their return.

Far away, a light shone dimly. It was another of the radium bulbs. They followed the tunnel. It was long and a bit winding. They passed more lights. The tunnel they found silent and empty.

"Are you certain he came this way?" Lindquist demanded.

The Cyclops grunted and urged his master along. Both kept their hands near their atom pistols. Far ahead, they suddenly saw a checkered glow of green and dull gold. Voices reached them vaguely. They tiptoed closer and saw daylight shining through green and yellow foliage. It was an exit from the castle, a hidden exit through which Strower had fled from the threat of the Interplanetary Guard.

With both pistols leveled, Lindquist stepped to the edge of the concealing foliage, brushing away the leafy branches with the muzzles of his atom pistols.

Strower and two more pirates stood in a deep ravine beneath a group of trees less

than a hundred feet away. Two degmen were with them, and all five were watching the banks of the ravine and listening. Strower held a gun in his hand. The other pirates were armed. Lindquist stepped clear of the tunnel and stood there for a moment contemplating them. So intent were they in gazing up the opposite hank of the ravine that they did not see him. His voice cut the leafy silence in dead, measured accents.

"Strower—I've caught up with you at last. You're about to join Denhart."

Five startled faces turned his way. Strower's face went livid with chilled surprise and hatred. For a second or two he stood frozen into startled indecision. Then his face twisted into a snarl and every muscle of his body leaped into rapid action. His gun arm streaked into position and fired, but already death, blue and silent, spurted like twin rocket exhausts from the guns of the lone pirate. The guns of Strower's companions were half raised but never leveled, for all three pirates tottered and fell, firing wild, blue flashes of silent destruction. With cries of alarm and widely distended eyes, the degmen disappeared into the bushes like frightened rabbits. The ugly face of the Cyclops peered over Lindquist's head, a slightly cynical smile of amusement touching his wide mouth.

The lone pirate stepped leisurely to the fallen men, never taking his eyes off them. He turned them over with his foot, satisfying himself that they were really dead.

"That leaves the big one—Ellend," remarked Lindquist grimly. "Some day his turn will come if the powers who work in the dark will permit me."

The Cyclops motioned anxiously back toward the deg they had just left. Lindquist nodded understandingly.

"I know, Cyclops. More enemies. We'll just have to drift and hide until this business is over."

CAUTIOUSLY they climbed the bank of the ravine. Lindquist stepped out from the bushes which lined the edge and almost immediately returned, bumping the Cyclops. His face was one of astonishment, and a strange light crept into his eyes. They glittered, as they often did when his imagination conceived a new and



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daring plan. He motioned the Cyclops to look. What the huge troglodyte saw was a cruiser of the Interplanetary Guard stationed less than fifty yards away. From the direction of the deg, the sounds of excitement and conflict reached them faintly. In the distance, another of the cruisers was grounded. The third still circled above Grygin Deg. The Cyclops saw no one about the nearer cruiser which towered so close to them, but from a small doorway in the side, voices issued faintly.

"We're going to take that ship!" Lindquist hissed, a wild gleam in his expressive eyes. "Come—run for it!"

The Cyclops lumbered swiftly after his lithe, running master who leaped quickly and quietly through the little doorway. He followed Lindquist into the control room and heard his crisp edict to several startled officers of the Interplanetary Guard.

"By all the fates!" one of them managed to find his voice. "Lindquist!"

"Wha—what are you doing here?"

"I'm here, and I'm in a hurry! Step fast! See that they leave properly, Cyclops!"

The officers stepped fast, the Cyclops behind them, removing their guns as they filed out the doorway in bewilderment and chagrin.

Lindquist radiated triumph, his eyes sparkling. He had always wanted a cruiser like this. Quickly he guided the ship into the sky. Down below, he saw guardsmen and red swordsmen mobbing the deg. Many of the latter were astride the skels, flying among the turrets and towers of the deg in search of degmen. The companions of Yald and Ruod who had escaped that day when the pirate ship had plunged among the skels had returned with ships of the Interplanetary Guard.

"We're leaving fast," announced Lindquist. "One of those ships is likely to give chase when they get no signals from us, but what chance have they got with the start we'll have? They've never been able to catch me before in my own ship, and their cruisers are the swiftest in the solar system."

The speedy cruiser flashed through the heavens, until it was a fast-diminishing speck in space. A minute later it vanished altogether.



WHO.....

killed black-satin Ada Brent?

WHY.....

did the General's lady commit suicide?

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Since so many PLANET STORY fans have written in expressing a yen for a Paul, Morey or some other original drawing, we've decided to give the gang a chance. From now on—this issue included—the three most outstanding letters will rate a choice of illustrations. The winners will be able to pick their drawings in 1, 2, 3 order, first choice, of course, going to No. 1. You will be the judges. Your letters will be the index by which we will gauge the winners. General worthwhileness, intelligent amusement-value, and sound constructiveness are the points to keep in mind. Please be sure, when you write in, to point the finger once, twice and three times. Winners names will be announced in each following issue of PLANET STORIES.

DUCK, THOMPSON, DUCK!

Editor, PLANET STORIES,

S.S. Blythe,
Norfolk, Va.

DEAR SIR:



I read your magazine with the greatest of pleasure, and then came to the vizigraph. That really put a damper on all the pleasure I had received. Probably I am not bright, I don't know. But two colleges and Oxford University should at least make a man half witted and I seem to like your stories, your first issue and your second, *they were swell*. I have been in practically every country in the world and every continent. Have searched for rubies in Siam and Burma, chased around the Gold Coast of Africa, hunted in all parts of the Congo. Prospected for gold and diamonds up the Amazon about four hundred miles beyond where any other white man had been, been on two expeditions to the Gobi and traveled pretty near all over the Far East, and I think that is about as much as a man can usually do in a lifetime, even if I am not an old man yet, and to hear someone run down the efforts of a man who is trying to give a little entertainment to his fellow men burns me up. Who does Mr. D. B. Thompson think he is? The only man who can judge a story, or perhaps he has a position that gives him power to say what other people shall or shall not read. How does he know what other people like? There are about five more men on this ship who have been reading science fiction since about 1926, and they all seem to think your first issue and your second were grand.

This is my first letter to any magazine even though I have been reading science fiction since I was a kid, so don't be too hard on it and print it so that Mr. Thompson and a few more like him can read it and know that *their* intellect is not the controlling one of the reading world. Yours in good faith and wishing only that you will make it a monthly.

I am your ardent well wisher.

LEON DeMARLO.

YOU GOTTA LOOK AT IT THIS WAY . . .

DEAR MR. DEMARLO:

I wouldn't get too infuriated at Mr. Thompson for his somewhat critical letter in the last issue of *PLANET STORIES*. He probably spoke in all good faith, intending to make us sit up and take notice in the good old sf way.

It is pleasant though to hear from anyone as enthusiastic as you about the current issue. I certainly shall try making the magazine as good as you say it is.

Very cordially yours,
THE EDITOR.

ACKERMAN UP AT BAT!

236½ N. New Hampshire,
Hollywood, Calif.,
March 5, 1940.

DEAR PLANETEER:

NEW PLANET DISCOVERED! Found in the naborhood of Beverly & Vermont (intersection where is located my nearest newsstand). Cover on your first issue was most colorful and I think the Spring issue's was equally attractive. Drake is jake by me!

Fwun thing, in No. 2 U've doubled the number of storys U had in the initial issue, introduced the welcome "Feature Flash," and inaugurated the very vital vizagraf. Latter is unlike in letter columns.

Morey is a rite step in the direction of desirable artists. Bok might not be a bad lad to add. & one day some smart editor is going to get himself rewarded with a wreath of the rare radioflora from Venus for bringing back good old DOLD, he of the distinctive style. I didn't say a thing. . . .

Ross Rocklyne's "Tantalus Death" I thot tops. An outstanding story amidst all the output in the scienti-fantasy field for the month in which it apared. Incidentally, Rocky; with whom I had the pleasure of consorting at the time of the Stf Convention last summer; is one writer who really looks like a rocketor. The latter expression, I might explain, is used by the AMERICAN ROCKET SOC'Y, of which I am a member, as contrasted with the fictional form "rocketeer."

Was considerably intrested in Ray Cummings' most recent rewrite of "The Girl in the Golden Atom." The way one keeps running into these microcosmic storys sure shows it's a small world!

Principly interested in the Selwynnarrative ("Revolt on the Earth-Star") because of the robot's being called capeks. The late Karel Capek created the former word in his classic "RUR"—"Rossum's Universal Robots."

Well, may this *PLANET* continue to swing 'round the sun & show up on schedule each 3 mos.

Sciencercely,
"4SJ" ACKERMAN—*The Fantascience Field*.

ZWICK SPEAKS MIND . . .

Editor, *PLANET STORIES*:

DEAR SIR:

Just finished reading the Spring issue of *PLANET*. I thought your first issue was on par

with other Science Fiction Magazines (and I get *everyone* of them) but Vol. 2 far surpasses any of the newer S. F. Mags. I didn't find one single story boring. And best of all—the stories were *complete*. I hate continued stories—in fact I prefer one long novel—or several short novel-ettes (unless of course, it happens to be a reprint such as Famous Fantastic features) or just short stories. It's especially aggravating when the magazines are bi-monthly or quarterly issues.

Now for criticism. Olon F. Wiggins made such an about face in the two letters published I'm wondering just how many readers feel as he does. One thing sure—if I ever thought one thing—I wouldn't change my opinion for anyone. I've little use for these guys who "stand to judge" and then end up by soft soaping! When I find fault I don't retract. I found the first issue on par with most *first issues*. Even Amazing wasn't so "hot" ten years ago—so I'm leaving it to the Editor to choose what he shall publish in *PLANET*. If I happen to get a story I *don't* care about I feel the others make up for one bad one and I get my 20 cents' worth, regardless. Science Fiction Stories are bound to be "typed." Did any of you readers ever stop and think that an average of fifty-five entirely different Stf. stories are published *every* month. That includes novels, novelettes and short stories and no two *exactly* alike. When you consider that angle of it you won't wonder at Stf. being "typed."

My advice is—keep your present policy—stories of other worlds and the universe and future centuries. Don't use reprints—or serials.

And Olon Wiggins had better stick to his own publishing—"The Science Fiction Fan" could do with a few improvements—and as Editor—he lets a few so-called "poor" articles get by.

I don't make a habit of airing my views—in fact this is only the *second* letter I've ever written to Stf. magazines. Any time I don't approve of certain policies in a magazine I just don't buy it. There isn't a magazine on the market that can't be improved, but that *doesn't* mean they aren't *good* magazines. Editors are only human—so they make mistakes—even as you and I—but there's no call to jump all over the Editor and try to make him feel like a fool. And its utterly *impossible* to please everyone. Now my choice in this issue is—"The Girl from Infinite Smallness" (and I hope to see another with these characters—soon) but my husband chooses "The Tantalus Death"—my daughter's choice was "Goddess of the Moon"—my son-in-law, "Dictator of Time." Not one of us agreed—so what can you expect with *thousands* of readers! I'm not a scientist so I don't like too much data—yet I know a lot about radio construction and like *that* type of story—but how many housewives of today who read Stf. know anything about the principle of radio? I don't know a thing about astronomy—yet I enjoy stories about the Moon, Venus, etc. So I say again—Mr. Wiggins you stick to editing S. T. F. and let the Editor of *PLANET* do his own choosing—even "typed" stories.

Best wishes and looking forward to the next issue of *PLANET*.

Sincerely,

MRS. GINGER ZWICK,
Just-A-Mere Farm,
Orchard Park, N. Y.
Box 264

"KISS ME AGAIN, KISS ME AGAIN . . ."

From an old, sweet song

February 4, 1940

DEAR EDITOR:

Today I made my purchase of your effort PLANET STORIES.

As you probably have been told by so many readers already, the science-fiction market is flooded. Bob Tucker of *Yearbook* reports that 18 stf. and weird mags have appeared—and some disappeared—during the past year, 1939.

But all this is beside the point. There are a few mags that are prospering, and there are definite reasons that they are. Since, so far as I know you are new to stf. I will outline some of these facts.

1. Appearance. Trimmed edges give it a classy look, and I understand Fiction House is a classy company. This should be added right away. Also better quality paper.

2. Departments. There is one magazine that I know of that many fans buy for its departments alone! Especially have a large readers' dept. It's absolutely essential.

3. Art. This should be attractive, especially covers. If I may say so your art is absolutely putrid! Morey has long ago degraded to a "hack." And these new artists are as bad. The cut for the readers' dept. is good, though. Try for Paul, Finlay, Wesso, or Schneenman.

4. Stories. And these are not the most important part of the magazine. They are probably the last part of the magazine a reader reads! The stories you publish, to tell the truth, I don't read half of them. The very names such as "Martian Terror," etc., stink of hack, hack, hack. But you Ed. are the one to judge the stories.

So in conclusion, I say lots of luck, and may PLANET STORIES become one of the best.

Scienterly,

TOM WRIGHT.

OLD-FASHIONED, THAT'S ALL

March 15, 1940.

DEAR MR. WRIGHT:

There's nothing like being frank. If our art is putrid and our stories stink of hack, hack, hack, I appreciate your telling me so, but I must say it is slightly discouraging. What would be the use of adding a few more pages or trimming the pages of a book as lousy as that. It would simply be a waste of effort.

It doesn't seem to me that you and many other SF fans have a very wide point of view on this matter. I should think you would get pretty tired of having all magazines illustrated by the same half-dozen artists. If no one comes along and develops new men you're going to have a pretty dull and static field.

As for stories, you say these are not the most important part of the book. That they are, in fact, probably the last thing a reader reads. Well, maybe I'm old-fashioned but I still think people buy magazines for the purpose of reading. I am forced to admit that I don't feel the stories are anywhere nearly as good as they might be. They are the best we are able to get at present, but they'll improve as we go along. Thanks anyway for the good wishes.

THE EDITOR.

RIGHT IS WRIGHT

March 19th, Tuesday.

DEAR EDITOR:

Please don't get me wrong. I didn't mean to

be so discouraging as I may have seemed, and perhaps in this letter I can be more constructive. I know it is work editing a magazine, and especially in these times when there are so many stf. mags on the market, material, that is *good* material must be pretty scarce.

Sure, we stf. fans do get tired of seeing all the magazines illustrated by a few artists, but not the good ones. Sure, it's fine to find and develop new talent, but make sure first that you *have* talent. One of the artists you feature, Morey, most certainly is not *new*, and as far as I can see has not improved any in years, and he probably never will. One of your new artists, Fawcette, could probably turn out some good work if he were a little more careful, but the work I see by him is quickly dashed off stuff, and not even the old timers can get away with that. Take a couple artists like Paul or Finlay, get them as regular illustrators, so you can be sure of good drawings, then try your new discoveries and if they don't stack up you still have Paul or Finlay for some good work in the issue. So much for the art work.

Now for the stories. From what I've heard FICTION HOUSE is one of the better publishing companies, so you ought to be able to get better type fiction. Most editors that are new to stf., and some that aren't so new think that readers of science fiction have a mental age of about 10, this is where they go wrong. They think that blood and thunder is all that fans want, a little of this is okay for a few readers that like this type, but not for the majority. All you have to do is go through the years and pick the best-liked stories, for example: *Twilight*, *Night*, *Forgetfulness* and other Stuart stories are always ranked high among the classics, and why? Not because they are blood and thunder, but because they are above the intellectual standard of average readers, not stf. readers, but average readers understand. This type of story sets one thinking, sets the reader free from everyday life, and that's why most people read science fiction, to get away from everyday life. So try a little of the better stuff that pulp editors usually reject.

True, people do buy magazines for the purpose of reading, but I think you'll find that they get as much pleasure out of reading departments, such as your VIZIGRAPH, etc., as they do from the stories. Don't load your mag down with worthless departments, have a few good ones, new ideas and make them interesting. An Editor's page would help, the intimate, chatty kind are best, also a larger readers dept. One thing I do like about you, you're sincere in your efforts.

I realize this letter is running to some great length, but there are a few more things I'd like to say. First: About the trimmed edges, although they are not necessary they do help a lot. They not only add to the appearance of the mag but also are easier to handle, and for collectors are far easier to keep. Also, I think they'd add to the selling quality. The other thing I'd like to mention is the cover and the titling, which is poor and cheapening. The artist you feature on the cover seems to be fairly good, but he picked a poor scene to attract readers.

After all's said and done your mag ain't so bad, and I think you are capable of making it a real successful mag. Just listen to what the fans say (not meaning me) and try hard and I feel your mag will be up with the best of 'em soon.

Well, best of luck, and don't take me too seriously.

Yours,

TOM WRIGHT.

REPP O.K.

Vineyard Haven,
March 30, 1940.

GENTLEMEN:

It would seem that the new sf magazine with the distinctive name is really about to succeed; at least if you continue to improve as mightily as you have in two issues. Your first was not good, though not as bad as it might have been; but your second carried merit.

Mr. Reynolds is not your best writer. No further comment. Bond is excellent, as usual. Isn't this a new style for him? Cummings should retire if he can't escape his atom-people (this was good, though). Repp is O.K. First interplanetary I ever read without an Earth-man in it. That is all in Repp's favor. Selwyn? More, please. Rocklynne? We'd rather have Binder, sometimes. Phillips is out. King? Please, we don't want any. Thus, my review of your authors in issue 2.

Can you get Williamson, De Camp, Paul and Finlay? They'd be a great help. Also please don't remain quarterly. Bi-monthly, at least.

Until the next issue, then, my best wishes and all the rest. You really have something in PSI

Sincerely,

ALLAN KENISTON, JR.

AGAINST MASS PRODUCTION

CHESTER PAYFER,
Route No. 3,
Yale, Michigan.

Editor, PLANET STORIES:

Have finished reading Vol. 1, No. 2 of your new mag. I liked "The Space Flame," and "The Tantalus Death," also "Revolt on Earth Star" about the best of the 8 yarns in the mag. Don't care for love element in stf, it's spoiled many a good yarn, at least stressing it too heavy has. I've always said love element don't register either in Stf. or in weird type of literature.

New ideas, more science and novel situations make Stf. the best fiction. Have been reading Stf. since 1926 and was for a long time member of the old "Science Correspondence Club" long since past and forgotten.

Don't make your mag a monthly. Good science fiction stories can't be turned out the mass production way, a fellow has to wade through bushels of Chaff before he finds a pure grain of wheat. I think the old Stf. was the best and I suppose the reason I think that is because in 1926 Stf. was a new type of literature with a few exceptions and of course while it was new writers did not have to cudgel their brains so hard for new ideas, pretty near any idea was new because the field was so new and these ideas seemed so colossal to us because we had never even dreamed of such vast and tremendous flights of the imagination. Now new ideas are, I would say darn near impossible to find: Time Travel, Interplanetary travel, Life on strange planets, etc. That's all old stuff and of course it has to be the foundation upon which 98% of all Stf. is built upon. So again I say it's very seldom that a reader finds a 100% new idea yarn. To new readers any good time travel or space ship or strange creatures attacking earth is a big thing to them because they have never read of it before. No matter how thrilling

or adventurous a Stf. story may be, if it doesn't have a new idea, it is just another yarn to me.

Friendly yours,
CHET.

AVERAGE = 67%

464-84 Street
Brooklyn, N. Y.
February 7, 1940

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just finished the second issue of Planet Stories. On the whole it was a hundred percent improvement over the first. The only fault I can find with the magazine is that it contains too many Earth menace type stories. Once in a while they're okay but when they come in droves there extremely boring to say the least. I am glad you have decided to include a reader's department, as many a wish-washy magazine has been improved through this method. Of course I don't mean "Planet Stories."

The Feature Flash is a pretty good idea although rather old, but it helps one enjoy a particular author's stories more than ever. The art work by Morey and Edwards was fine but Fawcette could stand improvement. By the way how's chances of me acquiring one of the original drawings of this issue. I would appreciate it very much as I am a fantasy collector and wish to acquire some good originals.

In my opinion the ratings of the stories are as follows: 1. *Martian Terror*—80%, a fine study into the psychosis of a man, torn between duty and conscience, and for once praise Allah, the author admitted that races from alien beginnings could not mate and produce little cherubs.

2. *Tantalus Death*—78%, a story showing that Earthmen are not haloed angels, big hearted and philanthropic but just plain mercenary, which is very true, also showing that the Martians are really not black-hearted rogues interested in robbing "wonderful" ? ? Terra.

3. *Dictator of Time*—69%, an aged and decrepit plot given the eternal new twist. Not bad but I've read the same idea at least 40 times.

4. *The Space Flame*—75%, very good handling of this plot pulled it out of the mediocre class. More stories of this type would improve any mag.

5. *The Man Who Killed the Earth*—65%, swell plot, lousy handling, could have developed into best story of the month.

6. *Revolt on the Earth Star*—70%, same old cry-moth-eaten plot, but this story was fairly interesting, especially the unusual ending.

7. *The Girl From Infinite Smallness*—65%, won't somebody please tell Cummings to forget the people in the atom. Ever since *The Girl in the Golden Atom*, we've had the same old stuff year after year. Even if it was a new plot, this story would be a flop.

8. *Goddess of the Moon*—60%, this story barely deserves 60%, but I gave it the benefit of the doubt. Please in the future don't have Earth saved by a Paul Revere ride to the Moon in a rattletrap spaceship, and if I remember correctly Burroughs in his "Moon Maid" first thought of the renegades riding from the big bad villains etc., etc.

The total of the above averages—67% which is not at all bad for a new magazine. I hope that you, the editor, will accept my criticisms in the spirit in which they are given, i. e. to make PLANET STORIES one of the top mags of the field.

Sincerely yours,

DICK BURNS

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